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A man in a red tank top and a woman in a gold bikini are shown in a dynamic pose. The man is on the left, looking up and reaching out with his right hand. The woman is on the right, looking up and reaching out with her right hand. They are in a futuristic setting with blue and white structures. A small rocket or probe is visible in the upper right, and a large sphere is in the lower right.

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By MURRAY LEINSTER

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JOURNEY FOR SEVEN

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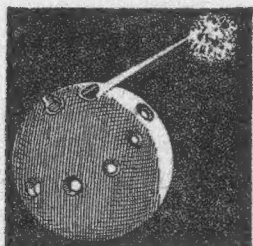
THRILLING WONDER STORIES

VOL. XXXVI, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

April, 1950

Featured Complete Novelet



PLANET OF THE SMALL MEN

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Pursued by implacable aliens from a saffron star, a quartet of Earth folk finally finds an odd haven of hope upon an astonishing world whose baffling contrasts defy logic! 11

Three Other Complete Novelets

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- THERE SHALL BE NO DARKNESS** James Blish 72
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It was strange, weirdly beautiful celestial music that the astronomer conducted on the faraway planet—but much stranger still was the orchestra he led!

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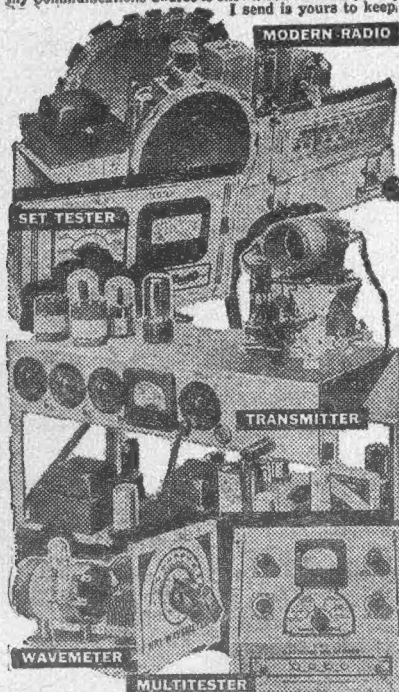
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LET'S take a look at systems. The current near-universal attempt to reduce all of living to this or that formula—be it based upon theorems psychological, political, semantic or technocratic, to name a few of the many whose millions of devotees thus seek an answer to the vexatious problems of existence—is a curious inversion of an historical trend.

Some five hundred years or so ago many of the ablest among the few semi-educated folk of the Western World, living in a well-regimented mediaeval church-feudalism, spent their lives seeking a philosopher's stone—a catalyst which would enable them to attain earthly nirvana through the creation of material wealth by the transmutation of base metals into gold.

Today, thanks to scientific advances along lines of atomic, molecular and other research, we have in effect discovered the philosopher's stone. The creation of nylon out of coal, air and water, for instance, would certainly have been an incredible example of alchemist's knowhow in pre-Renaissance days.

An Equation for Humanity

But, as usually happens, finding the philosopher's stone has done little to ease those same old vexatious problems of existence. In fact, the complexities attendant upon acquiring such knowhow has, if anything, increased them. So man has laid down his retorts and books of abracadabra in favor of search for a social philosopher's stone—some system by which this sorely-torn world can continue its existence in some sort of order.

In an age of amazing scientific advance there is an ever-increasing and all too natural desire to reduce humanity to some sort of workable equation. We have so many isms currently afloat that, in those countries where choice among them is still possible for the individual, we can seek salvation all the way from head-standing à la Yoga to advocacy of selective breeding à la the horse farms of Kentucky and elsewhere.

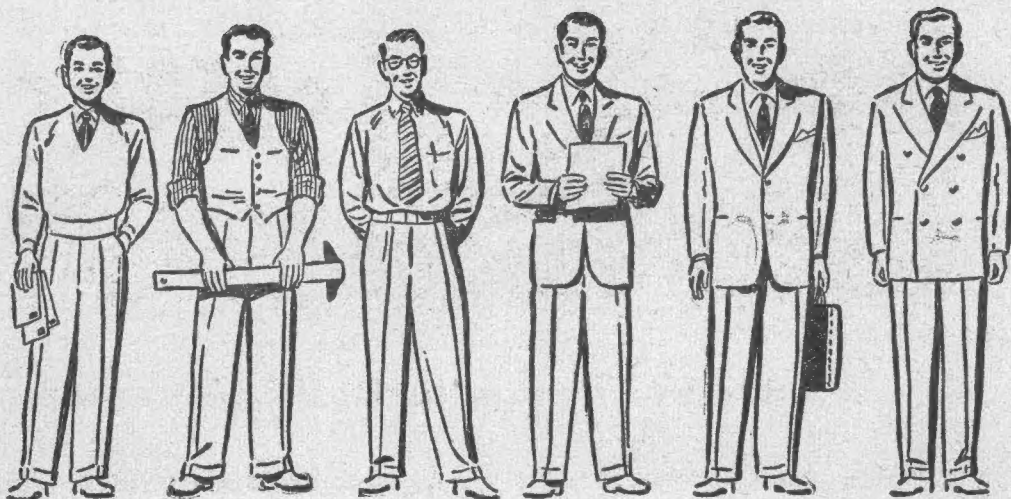
The unprejudiced student or onlooker (try to find that one, Diogenes!) can find merit in all of them, from the Pollyannaism of the Buchmanites to the pantheistic traditionalism of the various creeds of devil worship. They must answer the physical and/or emotional needs of a number of folk or they wouldn't exist.

Mechanical Example

The only trouble with all of them is that they don't answer the needs of enough people to be universally applicable without throwing hundreds of millions of men, women and variant ideas utterly out of joint. There are too many people, too many kinds of people, adjusted to life under too many types of conditions, too many ideas, to fit snugly under any one formula of life.

This problem of size is a vitally serious matter. Men who, from Zoroaster to Karl Marx, have sought to lay down regimens for human existence have necessarily done so out of the basis of their own experience. And no matter how vast this experience may have been, it was not and never can be large enough. If it has done nothing else

(Continued on page 8)



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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

psychoanalysis has made this point clear.

Some rules, which work perfectly within certain limits of time and space, are worse than useless when applied to larger groups. Of this a fine mechanical example is revealed in the recoil mechanism of the old French 75 millimeter cannon, which we studied too long ago in R.O.T.C.

It was a simple device, both in principle and in fact, which used a springless combination of valves and oil to nullify the gun's kick, thus making it the outstanding piece of artillery of World War One. And the formula could not be detected by outsiders, for when the cylinder was opened the pressure of the oil within caused it to explode.

We wondered, while studying it, why this perfect and simple device could not be applied to larger cannon—and were informed that the perfect balance of forces which made it possible simply did not apply under any variance of conditions. When armor was built which could resist the 75 the entire weapon became obsolete, as the French learned to their sorrow in 1940.

The same principle can be laid against all systems of society, however perfect they may appear in theory, however perfectly they may work in limited practise. Their application on a larger scale must bring ruin, for with size the basic factors of social problems suffer wrenching changes that make them as obsolete as the Ptolemaic theory of the universe.

Copernicus and Galileo

Unfortunately those who have discovered or been trained under systems that seem to work appear all too ready to insist on their enforcement after their application has long been proved ridiculous. When Copernicus decided that the Earth and other planets revolved around the sun in regular rotation, he was jailed, would probably have been slain had he not been a bishop's nephew. Galileo, who came up with proof of the Copernican theory, was forced to recant by an outraged Inquisition.

Otherwise honorable persons have repeatedly become crooks, killers, poltroons and fools when the little set of formulae under which they were bred was threatened by a larger truth. The evolutionary theories of Darwin and Huxley were treated as

heresies, largely because they were a blow to the ego of a fatuous humanity. They are still so regarded and treated in many parts of the world.

Currently the efforts of the Soviet Union to warp all science, art and learning to the political dogma of post-Marxianism provide a fine example of how otherwise enlightened men can seek to harness truth. It is their dogma that anything which does not operate to the advantage of their code of human existence must either be distorted so to operate or must be expunged.

An Old, Sad Story

It is impossible to believe that the inner circles of Communism are sufficiently unlettered or naive to be unaware of anti-Communist truths. Some of their members at least must know better. But in their zeal to promote the Soviet way of life they have elected to serve only one "truth"—the Soviet system.

This is the oldest and saddest story in all of man's dismal history. For, like the invidious Torquemada, these men believe they are doing right.

Actually no man or woman who rigidly follows or promulgates a "system" of living can be anything but a traitor to the advance of his species. Systems are at best hypothetical. It is to the supreme interest of those who care for the evolution of human truth and learning and the wisdom by which alone salvation can be attained to see that systems are kept hypothetical.

The only secrets of life and living are life and living themselves!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

RAYMOND F. JONES, whose excellent Peace Engineers trilogy was concluded with **THE GREATER CONFLICT** in the February TWS, steps into the forefront of our June issue with one of the finest romantic science fiction stories of this, the mid-century year, a long novelet entitled **SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND YEARS AWAY**.

This is the story of George Brooks, young engineer in the Microwave Section of Atlantic Engineering, of Rena, the technical journalist he intends to marry, and of her mysterious "pen"—which is in real-

(Continued on page 140)

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CHAPTER I

Attack from Nowhere

STARS exploded into being on every hand with all the suddenness and violence of catastrophe. The *Marintha*, battered and scarred, came out of overdrive into normal space with the fran-

tic speed of a bat just streaking out of hell.

A lifeboat blister was gone. There was a swollen streak all along her plating on one side as if something improbable

had played upon her briefly and softened the metal so that it bulged from the air-pressure within. One of her atmosphere-fins had been blown jaggedly off and there was a gaping hole in an after-compartment.

Lon Howel saw the great ringed sun off to one side, swimming grandly in space with its attendant family of planets. It was a yellow sun, sol-type except for the ring telling of some ancient satellite which had blundered inside Roche's Limit and splintered into dust.

THERE was a green planet not far from the *Marintha*. But somewhere there was that slug-shaped other ship—smaller even than the *Marintha*—which against all reason and probability and even possibility had attacked the earth-ship with insensate ferocity near a yellow planet many, many light-years back toward the Crab Nebula. The attack was preposterous, because the evidence had been overwhelming that there could not be another race in all the Galaxy that human beings need fear.

But there *was* another race. The bulbous ship—rather like a loathsome slug in outline—had not only attacked the *Marintha* without warning but its first fire had hulled the exploring-yacht and shattered an atmospheric-fin. Worse, when Lon threw an overdrive in absolutely automatic response to danger the bulbous ship had been able to follow.

It went into overdrive too, and for the first time in all history meteor-detectors rang a strident, continuous *alarm* signal while a human ship sped through emptiness at two hundred times the speed of light. Which meant that another solid object was within detector-range and stayed there.

The slug-ship had a matching course and velocity. It was capable of pursuit even in overdrive. To remain within a quarter-million miles of a ship at nearly two billion miles per second could not possibly be an accident. It was pursuit.

Lon Howel didn't believe it at first. Then he tried evasive tactics—in over-

drive! They didn't work. And he tried to outdistance the ferocious pursuer by overloading his drive, adding forty more light-speeds to the safe maximum. The pursuer matched it—which was something to make Lon's face turn slowly gray as he realized its implications.

Travel in overdrive is trying at best. Even a week in overdrive with the knowledge that an enemy trails one—an enemy one cannot battle—is worse. But a seeming unending flight during which it becomes apparent that one's pursuer mockingly refrains from annihilating you merely because he wants to be led to your home planet, which will be practically defenseless against him—that is far worse.

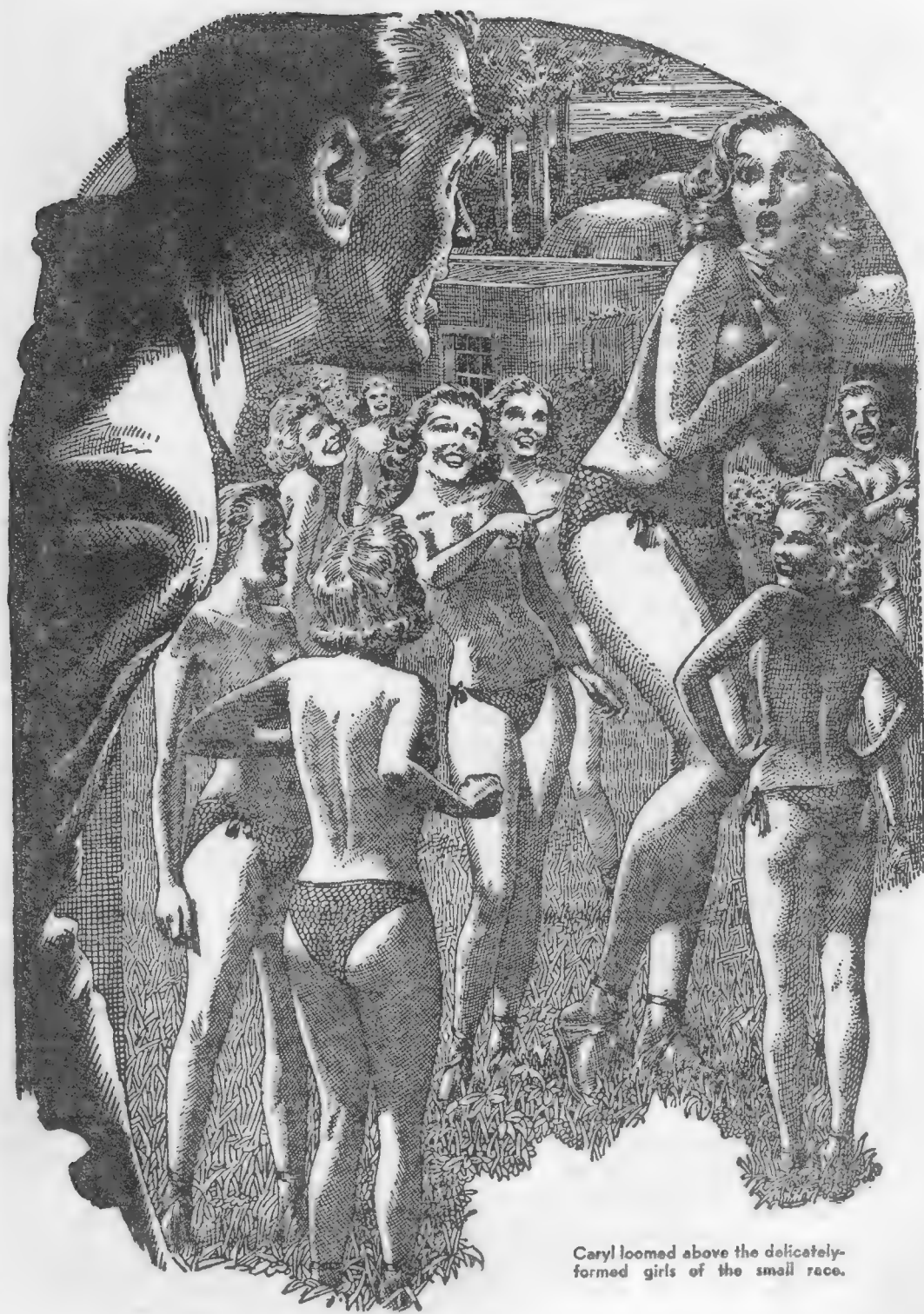
So Lon Howel cut his overdrive and the stars exploded into being all about him. He counted two seconds while abstractedly noting the ringed sun and the nearby green planet. Then he stabbed home the overdrive button again.

And there was the snapping rasp of an arc somewhere, a shout from the engine-room—and nothing happened. The arc died and the smell of scorched insulation was in the air for an instant before the air-changer cleared it. The *Marintha* was still in normal space and there were the two—no, three—no, four planets circling it.

Caryl came quickly through the door into the control-room. She said quietly, "The overdrive's gone, Lon. The energy-surge when you cut it out wrecked the very heart of it."

Lon said heavily, "There's a good trick gone. We might have got away. I don't know how good the slug-ship's detectors are." They had spoken of the enemy ship by its shape, lacking any other information save of its enmity and its power to destroy. "But if there was any delay at all it got out of detector-range before its pilot could come out of overdrive too. And I figured I'd be off on a new course before he could pick us up."

Caryl nodded. Once they had decided that their pursuer was waiting to be led to the planet from which the *Marin-*



Caryl loomed above the delicately-formed girls of the small race.

tha had come they had taken time to plan every maneuver carefully. Even the two-second pause in normal space had its reason.

"We should have destroyed our star-maps before now," said Lon coldly. "We should have bombs on hand to blow the *Marintha* to atoms. Since we've stopped leading the way home they'll stop playing and take us. Of course we must die so we can't be drained of any information.

"Get busy destroying all our navigation stuff, will you? Set everybody at it. I'm going to head for that planet yonder. If we can land on it we may have time to duck before they can find us. By the color and sun it should be an oxygen planet."

The *Marintha* was plunging toward the green world on interplanetary drive as he spoke. Caryl nodded and went back out of sight. There was no time for sentiment now. The *Marintha* was one of literally hundreds of exploring craft out in space from Earth.

Humanity was expanding with splendid confidence. The days of romantic exploration had returned. The cracking of the problem of speed faster than light had set men free from their own solar system. The Mathewson discoveries of the basis of pathogenicity had wiped out all fear of plagues from alien micro-organisms.

The solution of the mystery of the Lost Race had seemed to ensure that humanity could have no enemies—because the race which had been mankind's fore-runner had apparently been a galaxy-wide culture which had perished by its own act and had left no potential enemies of its descendants alive. So it had seemed.

Humanity had been sallying forth to occupy and populate a galaxy with an estimated three to four hundred million habitable planets awaiting its coming. Anybody could take a yacht or a colony-ship and go out and find a planet which was his for the taking. But the *Marintha* had found an enemy. And any race which could trail in overdrive had humanity at its mercy.

There was the smell of scorched cellulose—a heat-ray on starmaps and navigation records. The air-changer battled valiantly with the smell. It strengthened and weakened as new batches of paper and records were thrown into the cone of intolerable heat. The *Marintha*, though, was unarmed.

The heat-ray was designed only to clear away vegetation around a landing-place on a strange world. Hand-weapons had seemed all that any ship needed to carry. An antiquated gun, shooting explosive bullets the size of one's little finger, was the most dangerous device on the ship. Superson pistols were adequate protection against any form of wild life smaller than an elephant.

The *Marintha* was doomed. Only if she could get down somewhere on the planet below would there be even a faint possibility of a lease on life for the four humans on board. And they had an obligation greater than self-preservation.

To be captured alive or even in dying to furnish information by which an enemy race could learn of the whereabouts of humanity would be a form of treason so monstrous as to have no name. Lon did not even think of seeking to save his own life or Caryl's or either of the others. It did not occur to him to try to compromise with the stark necessity of dying.

AN unwarned Earth might be subject to attack. The slug-ship had weapons humanity had not dreamed of. The beam which made one whole side of the earth-ship's beryllium-steel hull bulge out like wet paper—the fraction of a second delay in getting into overdrive would have drained her of air and left everything intact for an enemy's inspection—that beam was not only unknown but unimagined by men.

The weapon which had blown off the atmosphere-fin and holed the hull and sent the lifeboat spouting off in flaming fragments had never been conceived. It was not a matter of material missiles. It was something else. Humanity,

warned, might turn its thoughts to warfare and arm itself. But humanity now was defenseless.

So Lon sent the *Marintha* plunging toward the green planet. He tried not to hope but it was hard to refrain. In a fiftieth of a second the slug-ship should have overshot the place where the *Marintha* had cut her overdrive field.

It should be seconds before the fact could be noted and interpreted and it was possible that, with haste to introduce errors, the slug-ship might be trivially off-course and actually out of detector-range when it got back.

If it hadn't stopped and turned about in less than five seconds it would be ten thousand million miles away.

To be within a quarter-million miles of the exact line—meteor-detector range—and a quarter-million miles of the correct distance would be superhuman.

Lon found himself casting his mind ahead feverishly. If he could get to ground. If he could conceal the ship under water or in towering vegetation! If he could somehow hide on a planet from pursuit he could not evade in space, then the crew of the *Marintha* might contrive something either to defeat and destroy the slug-ship—or to escape with the news of its existence and, inevitably, that of the race which had made it.

The disk of the green planet grew and grew. Lon piled on every ounce of acceleration he dared. He saw a blue sea and polar ice-caps. He saw a cloud-mass looking like a blob of white, overlaying green land and blue sea alike. The round face of the world almost filled the forward screen and his speed was so great that he could not possibly stop short in time to land on the near side, must circle and ground on the farther hemisphere.

He swung the battered little explorer-yacht back on its course and began to apply deceleration. Careful math was needed for such a task but he did not intend to ground gently at a predetermined space-port. Anywhere on the

far side of a ten-thousand-mile disk would do. The deceleration built up and in spite of himself he hoped.

Then the alarm rang stridently.

He set his lips and abandoned all flimsy and now impractical plans for continuing to live. He flung the *Marintha* about again, end-for-end. He plunged for the planet's face once more, crushing acceleration pressing him hard against the pilot's seat. He changed course a little.

There the sea looked deep—very deep. He had hit atmosphere at full interplanetary speed. If the *Marintha* didn't break up and reach ground only as a shower of incandescent metal droplets, at least she'd plunge down to the very greatest depth of this unknown sea and the slug-ship would never be able to locate or recover her.

Caryl climbed through the door and struggled to his side. "No chance, Lon?" she asked quietly, panting a little with the strain of fighting such acceleration.

"Not a prayer," he said briefly. "Sorry." Then he added steadily, "I wish you were back on Earth, though."

Something flamed past the *Marintha's* hull. It was a near miss—a miss by feet only. A second and third and fourth followed—all near misses and all on one side.

"Trying to make us sheer off," said Lon evenly. "We could go around the limb of the planet and they know it. They don't want to riddle our hull, for fear of losing useful data. But they've got to. We'll hit that deep now, I think, even if they smash us first."

He switched on a stern visiplat. The slug-ship was still so far away that it was invisible. But its location was in no doubt. As he looked a thin pencil of ravening flame sprang into existence, seemingly reaching from infinity to the hull of the fleeing space-yacht. The *Marintha* reeled.

Another and another and another of the instantaneous bolts winked into being and each time the *Marintha* shuddered under the impact. Her drive went and her gyros. She hurtled on toward the planet, turning slowly now and

quite helpless to avoid a crash. Acceleration ceased. Lon reached out his arm and put it around Caryl.

"Tough luck," he said wryly. "Nice to have known you, Caryl. Look me up on the other side, will you?"

She kissed him, very white. There was a rending crash as another bolt struck. The slowly tumbling little ship was near indeed to the green world. A rotating port showed it, so near and so huge that they could see only a part of its surface. It was so near that it was suddenly down. They fell and the details of its surface grew more distinct.

"I guess eight hundred miles," said Lon, "and before the instruments went we were hitting a hundred and twelve miles a second." He held her fast. "Be seeing you."

The surface of the planet toward which they fell was abruptly blotted out by a flaring incandescence. That was the air, compressed by their fall, heated by compression to a blue-white.

CHAPTER II

Death from the Sky

THEY felt nothing. They waited for the ports to break through and all the interior of the ship to fill with the incandescence that would snuff out life before they had time to know death as it took them.

But nothing happened—nothing. The incandescence died away. They felt all the sensations of free fall—absolute weightlessness, unreasonable giddiness, the inherited panic which has come down to men from the ancestors of the Lost Race itself.

But the vanishing of the incandescence hinted that their fall was being checked—which was impossible. Nothing external could have slowed the fall of the yacht without shattering its hull and crushing the life out of its occupants.

Air screamed past the wrecked *Marin-*

tha. From the thinnest of whistlings at the upper limit of audibility it became a high-pitched shriek, then a squeal, then a moan which went down and down the scale. And Lon Howel looked sick with dread as it appeared that something was acting to break their fall without any sensation to tell of it.

He watched the screen. Revolving, it showed the thickly green-clad planetary surface below, the distant curving horizons, then a sudden glimpse of a sky already glowing blue between the fading stars. In that path of sky there were futile, flashing lightnings, stabbing at the *Marintha* but stopped at the ring of the atmosphere.

The features of the planet's surface swelled before their eyes. They would not hit the deep part of the sea. They would strike the shallows near a continental shoreline. Lon clenched his fists. No—they would strike on land itself. It was outside of all reason or credibility but they were not plummeting downward any longer. They were descending swiftly but that was all.

When mountains were discernible as separate swellings of the ground they were merely in a dive beyond that of an atmosphere-flier. When a mountain-crest reared up level with them they were descending not much faster than a parachute. But they felt no braking. Their sensations were still those of free fall.

Then there were trees rising to meet them and the *Marintha* crashed into a monster pile of interlaced branches and foliage, caromed off and splintered a group of slender stalks, growing straight and tall—and suddenly reached solidity with a bone-shaking crash, tumbled over and was still.

When the final crash came Lon was holding Caryl close, trying to use his body as a cushion. He succeeded. His head rang from a knock that came of the final turnover but Caryl was unharmed.

He got dizzily to his feet. "Everybody out, fast! If the Slug put some sort of tractor on us to keep us from smashing we've got to get away before they start

fishing it back up out of atmosphere! Outside!"

He shouted it through the door from the control-room. He helped Caryl, ignoring a trickle of red down his cheek. The four who made up the crew of the *Marintha* ran for the exit-port.

Caryl was first out the side-port—now on top of the hull with the ship lying on her side. She jumped to the ground, followed by the others. There was Burton, big-game hunter extraordinary and engineer for the private expedition. There was her father, a biologist of note on Earth but on this yachting cruise through light-centuries of space a zestful ship's cook.

They were bruised and battered by their landing. Without exception, they still did not quite believe that they were alive. But they went swarming out of the wrecked space-yacht and Lon snatched up what hand-weapons he could and joined them in scuttling off into the jungle which almost hid the ship.

Again nothing happened. They ran and panted and scrambled until they were a mile away. There they stopped, gasping for breath. Lon passed out superson pistols. He gave the antique firearm to Burton. There was a heat-ray with which they could build fires. That was all their equipment.

They had abandoned the *Marintha* because they certainly had not checked her headlong drop to destruction, yet it had been checked. They waited for the battered punctured hull to rise and go heavily and preposterously toward the sky. Human science said a tractor-beam was theoretically impossible yet something had slowed their fall!

BUT the wreck lay still. They were in a jungle almost without underbrush. Most of the trees had a communal habit of growth, of straight stalks which put out branches that presently put out other branches toward the ground, to take root and nourish yet other straight stalks, which would put out other branches.

There were no calls as of birds or

insects but a tiny musical humming seemed to come from nowhere in particular, forming a background-noise never plainly heard, yet always preventing the silence from being oppressive.

Lon ceased to watch the wreck. He scanned the sky instead. There was no sign of the slug-ship which had attacked without challenging some thousands of thousands of parsecs away and had pursued without respite but failed to follow them into atmosphere.

"Queer," he said, frowning. "Our friends certainly aren't scared off. What's keeping them?"

Burton said meditatively, "They could think this is our home planet. Have you any idea what system this might be, Lon? Could they be hunting an Earth-colony now that we've gone to ground? Perhaps hunting a city? Would there be humans here, do you think?"

Lon shook his head. "There aren't more than a couple of dozen actually colonized planets so far—with people on them in thousands or with settlements bigger than villages. The odds would be millions to one against even a single plantation here."

Caryl's father said, "What checked our fall, Lon? You didn't. We were really splitting space wide open. You meant to crash, didn't you?"

"We were hitting a hundred-twelve a second," said Lon curtly. "Most meteors hit Earth's atmosphere at around forty-five. We should have vaporized in the air and if anything was left it should have plunged into what looked like an ocean deep back yonder." He jerked his thumb toward the horizon. "We agreed it was more important not to give them anything to work on than to save our lives."

"Quite so," Caryl's father conceded.

"There was incandescence in front of the forward ports," added Lon, still scanning the sky. "Then it stopped. Our fall slowed progressively. I thought the slug-ship had slapped something on us and was pulling us back."

Burton suggested, "Maybe they can't lift the *Marintha* because a tractor-beam doesn't work in air. Or maybe

she's too heavy for their stuff."

"To which," said Lon, "there are two answers. One is that we were decelerated from over a hundred miles a second to almost zero in a pretty short time, so whatever did it had plenty of power. The other is that it *did* work in air. The longer we were in atmosphere the slower we fell. And it worked on us as well as the ship."

Caryl's father said mildly, "The planet where the slug-ship jumped us was a chlorine planet. The vegetation was yellow, and it was a white-dwarf sun. Maybe they haven't landed because they've no equipment for working in an oxygen atmosphere."

"Not likely," said Lon. "Any space-suit would do."

Then Caryl suggested, "If there's something that checked our fall—and there was—maybe they ran into it when they started to follow us. Maybe they noticed something working on their ship and got away fast. We would have if we could. We did when the slug-ship jumped us. At least we tried."

LON blinked at her. He had ideas about Caryl but every so often she startled him by showing brains which had very little to do with his feelings for her. This was such an occasion.

"You've got something there," he said, as he thought it over. "If the Slug started down after us and ran into something the creatures inside didn't understand and couldn't smash—they'd back off in a hurry! Right!"

"But then what? What'll they do now? Fumble around a while, or try to get word back home? Will they try to find a way to get at us or yell for help to wipe us out of space? If you're right, we've a chance to go on living."

Then Caryl's father said, "And what are we going to do with it?"

"Plenty!" said Lon evenly. "All the human race is out exploring as if the whole Galaxy were a glorified picnic ground. No idea of danger. No idea that any ship needs arms. But whoever or whatever is in that slug-ship is dangerous and arms are needed against them

because they don't like us.

"They don't like us so extensively that they've gone to a lot of trouble following us—they think home—with the idea of wiping us out. They'll do the same thing to any other Earth-ship they come upon. Next time they may succeed—and there will be Earth, helpless as a sitting duck.

"They'll smash it like an undesirable bug if our friends up yonder are typical of their race. The thing we've got to do is to get a warning to Earth. If it costs all our lives it'll still be dirt cheap."

"I was in the engine-room," said Burton drily, "when something a foot across stabbed through the plating and hit our main drive. It missed me by inches and I had just time to get out and slam the door before the vacuum got me.

"But I did see that our drive is smashed. It's not even scrap-iron. Some of it's melted and some of it simply splashed. It can't be repaired. We need a new drive to navigate and we couldn't make one in a thousand years."

"Our overdrive's gone too," said Caryl unhappily. "It blew out. We might repair it but—"

"I agree on the need to warn Earth, Lon," said Caryl's father, "but I don't see the ghost of a chance."

"Neither do I," admitted Lon. "I guess we've got to make one."

Something moved across the sky very far away. It had flapping wings. Burton shaded his eyes. All of them watched it. It certainly wasn't the slug-ship. But the atmosphere was faintly misty and they could not tell whether it was something quite small and near by, flying slowly, or something of considerable size a long way off, flying fast.

"It could be alive," said Burton. "This would fly here, naturally. But we don't know yet what sort of things they are. There's a flying carnivore on Spicus Four that—"

"Could it be a flying machine?" asked Caryl uneasily.

Burton shrugged. "A few days back," he said drily, "I'd have smiled at your ignorance, Caryl. Right now I simply don't know."

The evidence had seemed conclusive, just a little while before, that there could not be any intelligent race in all the Galaxy except the human. There was a race that lived on a chlorine-atmosphere planet near the Crab Nebula. But the odds against a second non-human race remained enormous and certainly chlorine-breathers would not have made a colony on a yellow-sun satellite.

"As far as that creature's concerned," agreed Lon, "there's no way of knowing. The chances are it's simply something that wings grew on naturally. But I've got a feeling there's something unusual on this planet that will either kill us or help us. I think we'd better try to find it in a hurry. We need to send that warning to Earth and we may not have much time."

The four humans were not very impressive just then. They were battered and disheveled. They possessed exactly what they had worn on the *Marintha* plus the hand-weapons Lon had snatched up at the last instant.

Their ship was a hopeless wreck and when in repair it had been unable either to escape or to defy the slug-ship, which presumably still hovered overhead out of atmosphere. They were definitely not in a position to speak of communication with Earth some light-centuries distant.

"There's no force-field in nature," said Lon doggedly, "that would have kept us from crashing. There's nothing in Earthly science either, that could have done it. But something did. We've got to find out what it was and who or

what handles it and try to make a deal to warn Earth about those chlorine-breathing maniacs in the Slug and their homicidal tendencies."

CARYL'S father pointed suddenly. Something was coming straight down from the sky. It was very small—smaller than the *Marintha* or even the *Marintha's* vanished lifeboat. It was hardly larger than the body of a man.

It could easily have escaped notice in its descent except for two things. One was the rate at which it came down. It did not drop like a free-falling object, with swiftly increasing velocity. It descended steadily, barely holding to the same rate of downward travel.

And this in spite of the billowing, voluminous trail of what looked like rocket-smoke behind it. The smoke, however, was yellow. It poured out fiercely, making enormous masses of thick vapor which seemed struggling to push on.

Lon stared—and something clicked in his brain. He had seen history-reels of ancient warfare and early interplanetary flights.

"Let's get out of here!" he snapped suddenly. "The other side of the hill! Quickly!"

He literally drove the others before him. Infected by his haste they scrambled over the crest of the hill on which they had halted, were running down the opposite slope, dodging slender tree trunks, when the blast came.

[Turn page]

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The ground kicked under their feet. It seemed to rise and strike a violent blow, so that their knees buckled. There was a flare of light so bright that the trees, where they rose above the hill crest, appeared to flame momentarily with an unholy light.

Seconds later came the roar—with it a monstrous solid wall of wind. Branches and leaves flew overhead. Clods of earth and small stones pelted the fugitives. Caryl turned a frightened face to Lon. There were crashings and cracklings, and all manner of minor noises in the wake of the unbelievable blast. They ceased to run. They knew what it was, of course. By instinct they turned and looked back.

They saw the ghastly cloud still rising skyward. It reached up and up and up, expanded at the top with a horrible swiftness until it took the form of a palm tree. It was a slender shaft of flame-lit vapor with a spreading rounded top. There could be only one kind of explosion which would make in lightning-threaded cloud the form of a palm tree ten miles high.

"We've got to see which way the wind blows," said Lon evenly. "That will be dropping radioactive rain presently. We don't want to be in the way of it."

They watched in silence. They should not have been alive. They should in the first instance have been vaporized with the *Marintha* in its faster-than-meteoric fall into atmosphere. They should have been killed in any event when their ship crashed. Certainly they should have been close by the ship, trying to salvage possessions from the wreckage, when the creatures in the slug-ship—they had no doubt at all that the guided missile carrying an atomic bomb had come from their pursuer—when the guided bomb detonated so close to the wreck that the Earth-ship was now mere metallic vapor in the upper stratosphere.

Even at their present distance, radiation-burns would have killed them certainly except for the hill-crest between.

"It's moving toward the ocean," said Lon at last. "But just in case, we'll get away from here. Our friends aloft will

think we're dead and come back later to hunt over the whole planet for humans."

Then he stopped. It was very still—very, very, very still. It was noticeably and startlingly quiet. The world around them was oppressively and quite horribly silent.

Then, abruptly, a tiny musical humming began. It was a sort of background noise which seemed to come from nowhere in particular. It was never plainly heard but it did keep the stillness from being oppressive. It began without preliminary, at full volume, exactly as if someone had thrown a switch.

Half an hour later they saw the atmosphere-flier.

CHAPTER III

Company

THEY were headed away from the bomb-crater then, moving inland toward a range of mountains not far away. There would be streams of water there, almost certainly some sort of animal life.

They had to think in terms of independent survival for days now and they were not equipped for anything but the most favorable conditions. They wore the light clothing suitable for the air-conditioned environment of the *Marintha*. They had superson pistols but they had no tools and absolutely no instruments for observation.

Gravity on this planet seemed to be a little greater than on Earth—not hamperingly greater, to be sure—but they could not be certain about it. They had been in the artificial gravity of the *Marintha* for so long that the feel of Earth itself would probably have been strange.

But the air was satisfactory, as the air of one out of every three planets of a sol-type sun is bound to be. There were smells about too. They were unrecognizable but basically familiar, as if merely the scents of vegetation in a

hitherto unvisited part of Earth. That also was reasonable.

With a given type of radiation from the sun and a given set of elements available for combination, certain organic compounds would be inevitable. Chlorophyl, for example. This vegetation was green and it would make chlorophyl to absorb sunlight and the chlorophyl in turn would make starches and sugars and undoubtedly cellulose.

The organic chemistry of sol-type systems is essentially alike everywhere in the galaxy. It could not be otherwise. So there should be food. But some plants on Earth are poisonous and some animals—mostly fish—so selection would be a problem.

That, though, was Caryl's father's department. He was looking at some pendulous clumps of nutlike fruits the size of baseballs, hanging from the branches of a tree-cluster with leaves as fine as maiden-hair fern, when Caryl cried, "Look! A plane!"

Lon Howel turned. And there was a plane. But it was a freak. It did not have the sheen of metal anywhere about it. It was not streamlined in the exaggerated fashion of Earth-fliers, which strive for the maximum of speed. It was reasonably good design as far as its fusilage went but the wings were minute. They were no larger in proportion to the ship than the fins of an earthly fish.

And the speed of the craft was not high. Even an earth-plane sometimes looks as if it were hanging in the air—as if it were not moving fast enough for its wings to support it. This aircraft gave that impression enormously multiplied.

It was near enough so that they could guess at its size—perhaps thirty feet over all—and its wing-spread of not over ten feet. The wings were not deep either. But the fusilage was large enough to hold two men side by side and probably several pairs of seats.

It flew quartering toward them, yielding smoothly to vagrant air-currents in exactly the manner of earth-gliders. It passed within a quarter of a mile, some

two hundred feet above the treetops. As they stared at it it went on toward the spot where the bomb had exploded.

"Do you suppose the slug-ship landed and these are—creatures from it?" asked Caryl in a whisper.

"They'd know better than to go into radioactive territory," said Lor slowly. "They aimed their bomb by sight and undoubtedly watched it explode. They wouldn't need to take a close look now."

The plane with the oddly insufficient wings lifted a little and disappeared over a hilltop. There was silence among the group of humans who saw it vanish.

"There've been probably sixty thousand planets landed on," said Lon sourly, "in some thousands of space-voyages. And there's never been a sign of an intelligent race except us. And we have to find, not one intelligent race but two! One of them is up to atmosphere-fliers but doesn't know an atom bomb when it goes off and goes doddering over to look at the crater!"

He added angrily, "We've led the slug-creatures to the planet of a second intelligent race— Not intending to but we've done it! The slug-creatures will think this is our home planet! We know what they tried to do to us! They'll certainly try to do the same to all this planet when they get a little more help from home!"

He clenched and unclenched his hands. "And it's not doing Earth any good, either! Another exploring ship will blunder into that chlorine-breather's culture sooner or later! If those creatures have overdrive they're no more limited to one solar system than we are. Humans are bound to run into them! And what will happen then?"

"It would be interesting," said Caryl's father meditatively, "to know why they attacked us on sight. Breathing atmospheres that are mutually poisonous, we couldn't very well interfere with each other's way of life. We'd have nothing to gain by quarreling with them. Why did they attack us? What could they gain by destroying us?"

Lon said bitterly, "Why does a weasel kill what it can't possibly make use of?"

Why did people hunt long after the food ceased to count? Why did people do deep-sea fishing for fish they couldn't possibly eat? Why did they follow dogs running after a fox? Why do we still hunt with cameras and superson guns?"

BURTON said deliberately, "That's a rather pessimistic statement, Lon. One only hunts things that can't fight back, for sport. One doesn't hunt dangerous things for the fun of it. If they think killing us is merely a particularly lively form of sport they must think their weapons are enormously better than any we can make."

"They could be wrong!" snapped Lon. "We haven't gone in for fighting each other for a couple of generations now. But we haven't lost the knack if the need arises! There's the plane, coming back. Give me the heat-ray, Caryl!"

The oddly underwinged plane reappeared over a hilltop. It headed back on nearly the same course it had followed to the bomb-crater. It flew low, hardly a hundred feet above the hilltops. And it traveled with a vast leisureliness. It specifically did not travel fast enough to be supported by such a small wing-area at such a speed. It made hardly forty miles an hour.

Lon turned on the heat-ray and sprayed it into the foliage off to one side. Smoke arose—thick, pungent smoke. It went skyward in a dense column and Caryl coughed and drew back. The smoke was aromatic indeed. To a human the sudden eruption of white vapor would have been plainly a signal. The party from the *Marintha* waited for the plane to swerve nearer, to see the cause of the signal and so come within waving range from among the trees.

But the plane did not swerve. It went on, whether placidly from lack of interest or because its errand was too important to allow of deviation, could not be guessed. There were ports in its side, and for an instant they were in line. There was movement inside. It could be detected. But it was not possible to see what sort of creature moved.

The humans waved and shouted fran-

tically. The plane kept on. It went placidly and obliviously over the tree-tops. It displayed no haste at all. It vanished.

From its first appearance to its last not more than ten minutes had elapsed. But the humans had hoped during those minutes. The disappearance of the plane without any heed paid to their signals was a shock.

"I suppose," said Caryl unhappily, "they thought that anybody around must have been killed."

The flaming stuff swiftly ceased to emit smoke. Lon looked at it with a scowl. The embers glowed only briefly afterward. Then the fire was out. It had actually flamed as long as the heat-ray played on it, no longer. The living plants seemed possessed of an enormous fluid content or else pumped much liquid sap to any part that was scorched. A forest fire could not sustain itself in such vegetation.

"They didn't worry about a fire in the woodland," said Lon moodily. "They must have known it would go out of itself. But why weren't they curious about how it got started? Or will they tip off somebody else to investigate?"

He stared in the direction in which the plane had vanished. He saw nothing but the thick lush growth which climbed the hillsides and filled the valleys between them.

Caryl's father said practically, "If there are intelligent creatures here we must get in touch with them if only to try to warn them of what they can expect. But how will we set about it if they ignore our signals?"

"We'll go hunt them," said Lon moodily. "It can't be far. That plane wasn't making over forty miles an hour and it was here within half an hour after the bomb dropped. It took off from somewhere less than twenty miles away."

"We've no idea of compass directions, of course, but we should be able to keep a fairly straight line along its course that far! And on top of the mountains yonder—I guess at three miles—we should be able to spot an airfield without any trouble."

Burton said drily, "But will we be welcome, bringing news that we've drawn the slug-ship here and that it's likely to come back with some of its friends to make a sporting event out of their massacre?"

"What else can we do?" demanded Lon. "Hole up and try to save our own skins? For what?"

He started off with Caryl by his side. The question of why they should try to save their own skins was relevant. They were in some sense like the space-castaways of romantic fiction. But castaways without reason for hope would still have no such reason for despair as they had. Other castaways could look for rescue for their children, if not for themselves.

But the conditions of their presence on this unnamed planet implied such danger to the rest of humanity that if it were not warned they would not only be castaways, but the sole survivors of the race. And that was not a prospect they could face. It was preferable to die for even a one-in-a-thousand chance to avoid it. There was no point in living as the only humans left.

THEY went through the jungle. There was little undergrowth. Almost all the trees grew in colonies, each interconnected by its branches with others. The result was an enormous density of foliage overhead and almost bare ground below.

But there was creeping stuff with long feathery filaments, which crept over the ground and matted itself so that it made a springy carpet of a powdery gray. Here and there it bloomed—tiny flowers of startling magenta. There was no noise except the faint almost imperceptible hum which had been cut so abruptly when the bomb went off and had returned so abruptly a short while after.

They went on for a long way, then Burton said, "Hsst!"

They stopped. He handed the heavy firearm to Caryl's father and drew his superson pistol. He was looking upward. He took half a dozen catlike steps, sud-

denly threw up the pistol and pulled trigger.

It made that curious resonant hum of all superson weapons in addition to the ultra-high frequency which strikes unconscious any living thing it touches. It was a very brief sound. There was a pause, then a series of tiny crashings, then a thump.

Burton picked up a small furry thing with enormous eyes. There was membrane between its legs. It was plainly an arboreal creature which coasted through the air from branch to branch like flying foxes and flying squirrels on Earth.

But its neck was armored with bony scales like a ganoid fish—say, a sturgeon. It had no teeth, but horny, inflexible exposed jaws like a bird's bill. Caryl's father regarded it absorbedly.

"A new species, a new genus, a new phylon," he said. "What did you shoot it for, Burton?"

"It's the first animal I've seen," said Burton drily. "I use the word 'animal' in a very inclusive sense too. If we have to hunt our food we'll have to try this sort of creature, most likely."

"But," said Caryl's father, "not yet. You don't want it as a trophy?"

"Hardly!" said Burton.

Caryl's father put it down gently with a shrug of his shoulders. As a biologist he was interested but as a humanitarian he knew that he had no way of preserving specimens, so he laid it down to revive—as it would—when the effect of the superson pistol wore off.

The ground began to rise, more and more steeply. They came to a patch of extraordinary vegetation like cactus which seemed to be all spines—a foot and two feet long—with no pods to speak of. It covered acres. They went around it.

At five hundred feet they disturbed a huge bird which flapped violently, rose straight up, then winged heavily away. It had feathers but its head was not birdlike at all. It had whiskers and its legs seemed to end in feet which certainly were not claws for roosting on branches.

At a thousand feet elevation there was a tiny rustling and Burton fired again. He went cautiously to look. It was an attenuated body with an animal snout and no external limbs. But it was not a snake. It was warm to the touch.

"Birds with whiskers," growled Burton, "flying platypuses with scales and now warm-blooded snakes with pig-snouts! What will the aviators of this world look like?"

There was no answer. But none of the living creatures was really unreasonable. Flight on Earth is equally an ability of egg-laying birds with feathers and mammalian bats with fur. That all Earthly birds have beaks is an accident derived from the fact that members of a particular biological phylon happened to begin to sprout feathers, and beaks were not incompatible.

The beaks were there first. On this world feathered bodies were not associated with beaks. The creatures who found a place for themselves crawling on their bellies did not happen to be cold-blooded.

The retention of ganoid scales did happen to coincide with the acquisition of gliding-membranes. That was all. The unfamiliar is not necessarily unreasonable. But the existence of an oxygen-breathing intelligent race other than man seemed an impossibility.

The problem of the ancestry of man had been solved by interstellar exploration. On Mars and Titan in the home system of humanity the first adventurers found huge areas of rubble which could be nothing but the debris of shattered cities and the rubbish of a vanished civilization.

DESTRUCTION had been so complete, however, that no single unshattered article was ever discovered in the wreckage. When overdrive was devised and men traveled to the stars, on planet after planet similar spaces of pure wreckage were found, from the planets of Arcturus to those of Rigel and beyond.

Throughout a two-thousand-light-year globe of space the vanished cities ex-

isted on the planets of appropriate suns. There had been an interstellar culture which had been destroyed more completely than any sacked city of Earth. Nothing was left to reveal what sort of creature had built the cities or their architecture or arts or anything about them save that they were oxygen-breathers and had conquered space.

The mystery of the Lost Race went unsolved for nearly twenty years. Then one surviving structure was found and the skeletal remains of a single member of the vanished people. The answer to the mystery appeared in a manner to arouse at once the sympathy and the irritation of mankind.

The Lost Race was the forerunner of mankind. It had conquered space and solved the problem of unlimited power. It had reached the heights of technical achievement. And perhaps its final conquest was that of time—it had learned to acquire a certain limited foreknowledge of the future.

And it had discovered that the radiations of its power-plants, or perhaps the subtler radiations of deepest space, had so altered the genes of all its members that a mutation lay ahead and their race was about to change to a race of monsters.

The Lost Race had committed suicide rather than see its children metamorphose into hairless, big-headed monstrosities so alien as to be horrifying. It had smashed its cities so that no succeeding race could ever learn to achieve equal disaster. Only on Earth had its self-destruction been incomplete.

On Earth its mutated children did survive. The monstrous descendants the Lost Race had foreseen with such despair were human beings.

The solution of the mystery—quaintly pathetic and oddly insulting as it was—meant, however, that there could be no oxygen-breathing race inimical to men. The Lost Race had wiped out all its enemies and therefore all enemies to its progeny. So that men regarded all the galaxy as proved clear of enemies—an inheritance to be entered upon without fear.

Now the castaways from the *Marintha* had found their security doubly questionable. There was a culture of chlorine-breathers which doubtless was still savage or mindless when the Lost Race committed suicide but which now was farther advanced in some sciences than mankind. And here, on this planet, were oxygen-breathing creatures who had advanced at least to the conquest of its atmosphere.

Lon scrambled up a steep incline and helped Caryl join him. Burton and her father clumped after them. It was not a cautious method of advance on an unexplored world but all men had the habit of confidence. They had lost the idea of apprehension.

Here a sort of pass pierced the mountains. They came to a place where there were no trees and the creeping grayish stuff underfoot gave place to fernlike green growths almost knee-high. Through the pass they could see a wide valley and other mountains beyond.

Then Lon's eyes focussed on a curious shimmering in the air. It looked exactly like a column of smokeless heated air, rising from an unseen spot perhaps two hundred yards away. He halted, lifting a hand for silence.

But as he halted something dropped into the fernlike growth at his feet. There was a crisp *pop* and whitish vapor spouted out. He leaped, trying to drag Caryl with him. But she staggered three steps and collapsed. There were two other poppings and two other globular clouds of mist arose. Burton and Caryl's father staggered and crumpled to the ground.

Lon caught Caryl to his shoulder and the superson pistol hummed viciously. He thumbed the beam-control to fan it out, swept it back and forth vengefully. Then he plunged downhill with Caryl.

She was alive. She breathed. Her pulse—as he discovered when he stopped and bent over her—was fainter than normal but fairly regular. She had gasped at the sound and sight of the spurting vapor. A little of it had entered her lungs but only a little. Even

as he swore in a consuming rage her eyelids fluttered.

He stood up and sent a second fan-beam barrage completely around him. Then he bent over Caryl and began to give her artificial respiration. He was furious with an atavistic, bloodthirsty wrath. She had taken three steps before she fell unconscious. But Burton and her father had dropped in their tracks. Lon could not hope to do anything for them.

CHAPTER IV

Contact

IT was very still. There was always that odd humming background-noise, never quite loud enough to attract one's attention but always audible if one stopped to listen. But there was no other noise of any sort. Lon worked grimly on Caryl.

Twice more he sent a fan-beam from his superson pistol through a complete circle. Anything living that the beam hit would be reduced to unconsciousness by the ultra-high-frequency sound-waves. There could be no creeping up on him under such circumstances.

At long last Caryl gasped again, panted and swayed dizzily. She struggled to sit up.

"What happened?"

"Gas," said Lon grimly. "I held my breath and jumped, dragging you. You got a little of it. Your father and Burton keeled over. How do you feel?"

"I'm—all right," panted Caryl. She got unsteadily to her feet. Then she said, surprised, "I'm *quite* all right. Really I am! Now what do we do?"

Lon was suspicious but her color was good and her pulse again was strong and regular.

"It may have been an anaesthetic gas," he said grudgingly. "We'll see. Tell me if you have any queer feelings turn up—if your heart pounds or anything of that sort. We'll go see about the others. Get your pistol out. Shoot

anything that moves. If gas turns up again hold your breath and run!"

He led the way back uphill. But this time his pistol was ready in his hand and he was all vigilance and cold caution. Once he thought he heard a movement and his pistol hummed. But when he angrily tracked down the noise he found a tiny shelter of sticks and leaves built around a tree-trunk and inside it small creatures which at a guess would grow up to fly, flapping heavily, while wearing whiskers.

They reached the clear space with the ferny greenstuff underfoot. They saw the figures of their two companions. They sprawled limply in the knee-high ferns. Lon began to search with his eyes for enemies. But Caryl watched the prone figures.

She cried softly, "Lon! They're alive! They're breathing!"

He looked quickly. It was true. The two bodies did move slightly in the rhythm of breathing.

"It's anaesthesia," he admitted. "But so's this!"

Again he sent a beam of inaudible sound from the superson pistol. He played it methodically on all the landscape within view. Any creature which could see him was bound to get a dosage of the stunning vibrations.

Then he went openly to the unconscious two men from the *Marintha*. They breathed stertorously. Their bodies were lax. There was a tiny incrustation of microscopic crystals on the foliage near them.

He bent over, holding his breath, and dragged them away from that residue of the gas-bombs' contents. Caryl began to work on her father, using the same technic of artificial respiration Lon had used on her. He hesitated a moment, then moved away with his finger on his pistol-trigger.

Whatever had dropped near him hadn't been moving fast. It couldn't have been thrown or propelled from any great distance. He searched with grim caution. But when he found one of the attackers he did not believe his eyes.

The attacker was a human being.

Not an Earth-human, to be sure—the stunned, prone figure, naked except for sandals and a curious single garment of closely linked metal plates, was not over four feet tall. It was slenderly formed though, and in no sense grotesque. It was simply a miniature man.

When the superson beam hit it it had dropped a very simple tube, open at one end and eight inches long. It had no other apparent weapon—if that was a weapon. But in a part of its single metal garment was a row of receptacles like the loops of an ancient cartridge-belt. Most of them were filled with objects that might fit in the dropped tube.

Lon stared blankly. He heard Caryl calling his name, uneasily but not in fear. He heaved the small form over his shoulder and went to her. Her father was already beginning to gasp a little. Apparently artificial respiration hastened recovery from gas, a little bit but not much. Its effect seemed not to last as long as that of a superson beam at full power.

He dumped the limp small figure down before Caryl. "A local citizen," he observed curtly. "Your father will see the answer. I think I see it myself. Do you need anything?"

"No," said Caryl, staring with all her eyes at the small human figure. "I was just—uneasy."

"There were some more of these folk," said Lon. "I'm going to look for them. If this fellow starts to struggle shoot him again—but gently."

HE went back to hunt for other small men. He found two. He remembered the column of what looked like hot air rising. He moved cautiously toward it through brushwood that rose breast-high. He heard a rustling before him and fired quickly. He heard the crash as something fell. An instant later he was looking down at a young female of the same miniature race. The man had been well-formed, but this girl was beautiful. Lon felt abruptly like a criminal.

He went on, more cautiously than before.

There was a clearing of sorts. He saw what looked at first like a hut. Then he realized that it was a plane not unlike the one he had seen before. It stood in a small place which surely allowed of no takeoff run.

There were two others of the miniature girls in sight. One of them tended something which definitely was not a fire but from which the column of heated air rose straight upward. The other spoke to her in a clear high voice whose syllables sounded like trills.

Lon raised his pistol. He felt lower than a scoundrel but there was nothing else to do. He did wait, though, until the one by the fire-thing drew back. Then he pulled trigger quickly, twice. The two girls collapsed limply.

He moved out and made sure that the one near the cooking could not possibly be scorched. He returned to the underbrush and brought out the other unconscious girl. He went back to Caryl. Her father was examining the small man with increasing enthusiasm. Burton was already trying groggily to stand up.

Lon told them briefly what he had seen and done. Caryl's father picked up the small-man tenderly. Burton came unsteadily in Lon's wake, returning more nearly to normal with every step.

They came out to the clearing and the plane to find Caryl and her father already there.

"It's beautiful!" said the biologist, beaming. "Parallel evolution, Lon. They're descendants of the Lost Race, too!"

"I'm encouraged—a little," said Lon. "They saw us and shot at us, just as we'd have done. They used gas. We use superson pistols. That suggests they have reached about the same stage of development we have. Our hunting weapons used to kill or wound. We have better sense than that now. So have they. If their technical level is as high—"

He went to the plane. The door was small but he managed to worm his way in. He came out minutes later with a square of cloth he had ripped loose. He began to tear it into strips.

"We've got to get these people tied up so we can try to communicate with them," he said, frowning. "I didn't see a motor in that plane."

He began to bind the small-men's hands and feet. Caryl, hesitating, took the other strips when he handed them to her and set to work on the extraordinarily delicate-seeming small-man girls.

The first man stirred in his bonds. Lon went over to him and lifted him to a comfortable sitting position. The small-man's eyes opened and as they cleared they looked startled. Then they flashed and his muscles made a convulsive heave, a tremendous effort to break the cloth strips which bound him.

"Easy!" said Lon, in as friendly a tone as he could manage. "What I'm saying is gibberish to you, of course, but we've got to make friends with you even if we have to break your neck!"

Caryl protested, "That's no way, Lon! Let me try!"

She spoke to the bound small-man, pointing to the three girls as unharmed as himself. Burton went over to the fire-thing.

"This is food," said Burton cheerfully, "and they're human in a way, so it must be human food. Smells good, anyway—but what's cooking it?"

There was a round ring, which seemed to be of metal. It lay on the ground. In its center there was a reddish luminosity which gave off heat. A metal pot bubbled above it and the smell was savory.

Caryl's father said enthusiastically, "Lon, my boy, it's marvelous! The Lost Race wiped itself out. We know that! Everywhere we've found the ruins of their cities, the air and vegetation has been right for men. But there's been no shattered Lost-Race city found on Earth! Do you see what that means?"

Lon listened while Caryl talked quietly to the first-waked of the three small-men and then included a second in her unthreatening if unintelligible conversation.

"They must have been like us, the Lost Race," said Caryl's father zestfully. "They wouldn't have eliminated

themselves until they made sure they had to. They'd wait until the monstrous children began to turn up—our ancestors. Our ancestors must have begun to be born!

"And the existence of men on Earth—look at it, Lon! What would we do if we faced the tragedy the Lost Race knew was before them? Most of us would want to die but some of us—a few—would love our children even if they were monsters. Some of us would slip away from the rest of our race.

"We'd take our strange and alien children—whom we loved—to a planet where they could live. Our hearts would be broken and we wouldn't want to live but we wouldn't want even our monstrous children to die. We'd stay with them, isolated from all the rest of our kind. We'd teach them as much as we could.

"We'd die gladly when the time came but—they wouldn't die with us. You can even guess at a pathetic attempt to teach our ancestors that there is knowledge which had caused overwhelming catastrophe—a tragedy. You can be sure those first children of the Lost Race weren't all alike—not even one species.

"So—there were other races and other species of mankind than our own. In time we—*homo sapiens*—had to wipe them out and now there's only one species of man on earth. And there's probably only one here. But they're men as we are! They're simply another species! And—"

CARYL said quietly, "Lon, I think we're coming to an understanding. One of the girls is awake. I'm going to turn her loose."

Lon watched. One of the three girls was staring about affrightedly. One of the men spoke. His voice was not as deep as those of the three Earth-men but it was masculine enough. His tone was steady and not in the least panicky.

The terror lessened in the girl's eyes. Caryl smiled at her and she unknotted the strip around her ankles. She loosed the girl's hands and stood back.

All three men were conscious now.

They regarded the Earth-people with keen estimating eyes. The girl spoke uneasily and one of the small-men answered without turning his eyes from the Earthfolk. His tone was quaintly dry.

"I like these people," said Burton abruptly. "They don't panic."

The slim tiny girl moved toward the cooking-pot. Burton moved aside as if for a child. He smiled at her. She gasped a little but the gentleness of his expression could not be misunderstood. She smiled back.

There was a sudden release of tension. The four Earth-humans relaxed—though Lon's hand stayed close to his pistol.

"They'll be figuring as I did," observed Lon. "If our weapons aren't lethal, any more than theirs, they'll figure we probably think the same way they do."

The man spoke again. The girl rose, caught Caryl's eyes and beckoned to her. She led the way to one of the bound small-men, plucked an eight-inch tube from a hanger in his belt and handed it to Caryl.

"That's his weapon," said Lon quickly. "She's handing it over. She's offering a bargain."

The girl emptied the receptacles in the small-man's cartridge-belt. She handed the round objects also to Caryl. Then she touched the small-man's bonds and looked anxiously at the Earth girl.

"Right!" said Lon, his eyes keen. "Turn him loose!"

Caryl bent to loose the small-man. The girl's fingers flew, freeing him. The small-man stood up and shook himself. He was not quite as tall as Caryl's shoulder. An earthly dwarf of his height would have been grotesque. But he had the build of a graceful and well-muscled boy of eleven or twelve. His face, though, was that of a mature and intelligent adult.

He spoke to Lon, went to one of his bound companions—Lon already had his tube-weapon—and passed over the ammunition for the thing. He went to the other and surrendered his weapon

also and his ammunition. Then he pointed to the bonds. Lon nodded. He released the other two.

Lon gravely returned to him the weapons and ammunition he had just surrendered.

Lon was a little tense but the small-man's expression was reassuring. At first it was blank amazement. Then he regarded Lon in keenly intelligent estimation. Then he grinned. He nodded cordially and spoke to the others. Their whole air changed. Lon grinned faintly. Caryl's father beamed upon the small-men as happily as if he had invented them.

Burton grunted, "They seem to get the idea. Now, if we're friends, are they going to invite us to lunch?"

It was a curious situation. The other two small-men girls began to stir. Caryl went to release them. One of the small-men went to help her. He grinned slyly as if amused at her size. She smiled back. The atmosphere of the camp was oddly, confidently relaxed. The first girl to waken climbed into the plane. She came out with bowls and tiny but humanlike spoons. Burton counted.

"Bowls and spoons for all," he said happily. "We eat!"

But Lon was thinking hard. "This is a break!" he told Caryl's father. "If they're descended from the same ancestors we are they must have something like the same mental processes.

"We can establish some sort of communication without having to figure out a brand-new type of psychology first." But then he added in an odd change to despair, "But they're not likely to be able to put up a fight against the slug-ships!"

Caryl smiled at Lon. "I'm not so sure!" she said reassuringly. "What do they use instead of fire? Would they use non-lethal weapons if they were primitive? Remember, they wouldn't have thought of making a bargain—of giving up their weapons for freedom—unless it would have been one they'd have made with us if things had turned out the other way about. They're civilized, Lon!"

"I hope so," growled Lon. "We've got to get started on some system of talking. I'll see what I can do."

HE beckoned to one of the small-men and cleared a bit of ground of the ferny stuff. The humus underneath was honest black loam, the decay-product of plants whose basis was cellulose whatever their forms might be. He patted the cleared earth smooth. He began to sketch, explaining as he went along, though the words would be useless as such. But he knew that the tones of his voice would help convey his meaning.

Another of the small-men came to look—the third. Burton and Caryl were at the metal ring which served as an open fire without smoke or fire or odor. The three girls grinned shyly at Caryl and laughed outright at Burton. He made something of a spectacle of himself to make them laugh more.

One of the girls brought a steaming bowl to a small-man. He nodded absently and took it. Another offered a bowl to Lon. He nodded absently and took it while he sketched. He went on with his painstaking explanations, tasting the contents of the bowl in the intervals when the three small-men absorbedly discussed his sketches. He felt that most of his meaning, at least, was getting across.

It was a lengthy business to convey the idea of space-travel by diagrams and gestures. It was more difficult to tell them the story of an attack by the slug-ship, their escape, their landing on this planet and the atom-bomb that had vaporized the *Marintha*. But he did his best.

"Now comes the tough part," he said over his shoulder to Caryl's father. The biologist had come to stand behind him. "Telling what has happened in pictures is tough enough. Telling what's likely to happen is something else!"

One of the small-men suddenly reached over and touched Lon's shoulder. He put his hand to his ear. The other small-men, their faces serious, stiffened in listening attitudes. Lon strained his own ears.

The tiny, humming background-noise ceased abruptly. For half a minute there was oppressive, ear-cracking stillness everywhere. Then, quite suddenly, the humming began again. The small-men relaxed. But their expressions were very intent. One spoke in their liquid, trilling language.

Another leaned forward and began to speak just as Lon had done, drawing sketches with curious precision in the smoothed-over loam and accompanying each sketch with a careful and sometimes lengthy explanation of which only his intonation had meaning. But it helped amazingly in the conveyance of his message.

A long time later—a very long time later—Lon got up from the ground, filled with a sick rage.

Caryl turned to him, smiling. "Lon, I'm making friends with these girls. They're darlings! And—Lon! What's the matter?"

He said thickly, "These people know things! The plane that passed over us spotted us and told these folk to look out for us. So they checked my story as I went along. I don't know what sort of civilization they've got but they know things! They know all about the slug-ship.

"They've just told me that it sent back word even from overdrive—we humans can't do that—and more slug-ships started to follow while it was still pretending it couldn't overtake us. That was while it believed us streaking for home.

"The first slug-ship's still hovering overhead. It's dropped another atom-bomb on their biggest city—they had time to get the people out—and smashed it completely. And there will be a good-sized slug-ship fleet along tomorrow and still more are on the way! They know things! But they're apparently helpless! They're not trying to do a thing!"

His hands clenched and unclenched in impotent fury.

"But how could they know, Lon?" asked Caryl blankly. "How could these people even know about another atom-bomb dropping? They haven't radio or

anything like that! We'd have heard it!"

"Don't ask me how they know!" raged Lon. "But they do! They made a star-map with the Crab Nebula on it and pointed out the solar system the slug-ship came from! There's no question. They *know*!"

CHAPTER V

Reverse—View

THE plane flew with vast leisure over the jungle-roof. Lon was horribly restless. Somehow, he had no uneasiness about the friendship the small-people now displayed.

They seemed to think it diverting that the people of Earth and themselves had started out by conflict, that they had had almost won by knocking out three of the Earthfolk and that then Lon had turned the tables on them without any animus—as evidenced by the return of their weapons as soon as they made overtures for an understanding.

The return of their weapons had been decisive. It turned their ambush and counter-ambush into a sporting event, which was very much to the small-people's taste because they had scored as well as the Earthlings.

But Lon was horribly restless. He had told them, with sketches and diagrams and gestures, of the danger that hung over their planet. They had given him further details, making the danger more imminent and greater than before. But they seemed undisturbed, like children. He couldn't make out the status of their civilization.

This plane, now—when it took off it simply shot straight upward with a hissing noise and then it went off across the jungle without any noticeable haste or urgency. There was no motor that he could detect. The wings, in particular, were hopelessly inadequate to perform the function they very visibly did.

Inside there was no instrument-

board, there were no controls except a couple of levers made apparently of plastic. Altogether the device looked very much more like a make-believe construction than the product of advanced technology. But it worked! It flew!

Their weapon was of the crudest possible sort—a tube with one open end, with no handle, no sight, no particular provision for accuracy. To be sure it was essentially a short-range weapon and made a gas-cloud on impact so that great accuracy wasn't necessary.

But again it had the quality of a child's make-believe. And when they told him that another atomic bomb had been dropped on their largest city it had been with the solemnity of children relating an imaginary catastrophe which was part of a game they played. It was as if the city could be replaced or restored as easily as by merely imagining it. How had they known about that bomb business, anyhow? They had no radios. Lon had heard no sound at all except their voices.

Hold on! There was the time when they had all stopped and listened. The humming background-noise like the normally unnoticed sound of insects in the country and of traffic in a city had stopped as if a switch were opened. There was dead, oppressive silence for almost a minute. Then the noise abruptly recommenced.

What did that mean? The same thing had followed the first bomb. He had noticed the shocking silence after the blast of the bomb had ended. It lasted much longer that time and it had ended in exactly the same way—with the abrupt restoration of the background-noise.

Caryl said, beside him, "You're bothered, Lon?"

"Plenty!" he said grimly, "Absolutely nothing has happened to make things better! The slug-ship people are on the way. These people seem to be helpless. From our standpoint it is utterly necessary that a message be got somehow to Earth.

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and... Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."

*Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp*

HE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you. Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff... keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair... and it's economical, too!

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®

Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
starring JEAN HERSHOLT,
on CBS Wednesday nights,

VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

"Sooner or later another Earth-ship is going to run into the slug-creatures and they'll swarm to Earth as they're swarming here. We've got to warn our people! We've got to! Some sort of defense has to be contrived—or better, some means of attack.

"Nobody can win a fight simply by defense! Earth's got to be warned to get set for fighting! We're the only people who could warn them, and we haven't the ghost of a chance! We'll be dead soon after that slug-fleet gets here!"

"Maybe not," said Caryl. "These people know what's coming, you say. And they certainly don't look worried! They act as if they're having a wonderful time!"

"I wish I could," said Lon. "I crawl inside when I think—and I can't think of anything else! These people know they're helpless! They're not trying to do a thing!"

"Maybe," said Caryl, "they've already done it."

Lon turned to stare. "Now, what do you mean by that?"

"I don't know," admitted Caryl. "But they're not savages. Did you notice the thing they cooked with? It was just a ring of metal. They laid it on the ground. They put the pot on it. The air inside the ring glowed. They cooked.

"Just before we started off one of the girls picked it up and stored it in the plane here. It wasn't even hot! That's a sort of civilization we haven't attained yet. Maybe they're ahead of us in civilization and have defenses so they're not worrying."

"An atom-bomb blew up their biggest city," said Lon sourly. "They wouldn't let that happen if they could help it! And look at the control-system for this plane! It's childish! There's not an instrument in sight! How can people be civilized without instruments?"

"Why," asked Caryl meditatively, "do we use so many instruments?"

"To be sure our machines are working properly," said Lon. "So we can tell if anything goes wrong."

"Suppose they know nothing can go

wrong?" suggested Caryl. "Then they wouldn't need instruments."

"They'd need radar, anyhow," insisted Lon. "They'd need weather-warning devices. They'd need things to keep them from flying into mountains in the dark!"

"Maybe they've got them," said Caryl. "But don't ask me where they are! I think these people are confident instead of oblivious to danger. And the girls are darlings! They act like beautifully raised children! They're adorable!"

"I would trade a lot of cuteness," said Lon grimly, "for one small space-ship with some weapons I could fight with!"

The small plane went on in leisurely fashion over the jungle. It did not fly high. It was rarely more than a hundred feet above the tree-tops. And it did not fly in the manner of atmosphere-fliers on Earth. It made no attempt at level flight.

CCROSSING a valley, for example, it coasted down the descending slope and climbed the ascending slope on the farther side. It seemed to have plenty of power but it flew low as if the pilot considered there was greater safety close to solid ground.

But he did not pay close attention to his piloting. He turned his head and talked to the others in very lively fashion, not looking ahead for minutes at a time. Yet the plane—so simple that it looked crude and childlike—went on with perfect steadiness.

They descended a steep slope and flew out over water. The surface was almost glassy, but ahead over the farther shore there were storm-clouds to which the pilot paid no attention at all. They flew beyond the water and under the storm-cloud. Presently there were great sheets of rain all about them. But there was little or no wind.

The plane flew almost as steadily as before, and the six small-folk chattered gaily enough. Caryl listened closely. Lon became lost in gloomy thought. Burton leaned forward.

"Lon," he said vexedly. "I don't understand this! I've known a lot of peo-

ple, and only pretty smart ones—and vision-screen actors—have much expression in their voices. But these people talk well! They put all sorts of shading into their tones.

"That chap is dry"—he nodded toward one of the small-men—"and that girl says things demurely and all the others laugh. I'm pretty sure it's not what she says but the way she says it that counts. I'm beginning to have hopes. These people aren't savages!"

Caryl's father chuckled. "As a biologist," he said contentedly, "I have observed that the function of an organ is not always in proportion to its visibility. The pancreatic islands, the endocrine system—none of those very important organs is as obvious as a man's nose. We can do without noses, but not without our pituitary bodies!"

"Perhaps these people have reduced their devices to a proper place—tucked out of sight. Small, and highly efficient, and requiring no attention. As, for example, on occasion we have to blow our noses but we never have to pay any attention to our interstitial glands.

"It may be that our small friends put their technical apparatus out of sight and pay no attention to it, just as we ignore our gall-bladders. It would imply a finer mechanism and a superior symbiosis of mechanism to the race it serves."

Lon shrugged. He looked out of a sideport. Overhead lightning flashed and thunder roared. Storm-torn clouds were shown by the lightning-flashes, flung about by conflicting winds. But the same lightning-flashes showed the teeming rain descending almost vertically.

The foliage—so near below—seemed merely to huddle quietly under a totally tranquil downpour. Storm-winds unquestionably blew aloft but near the ground they simply did not. And that was something so improbable as to make him bewildered. It was not a thing to be easily believed even while one watched it.

A long time later they emerged from the farther edge of the storm-clouds. There was bright sunshine. Below them

was continued jungle. Another range of mountains arose ahead, and the small plane continued toward it. One last small hill flowed beneath them—and there was a city.

Lon's heart sank. As a city, the sight was utterly disappointing. There were no great buildings. There was no architecture. There were no parks, nor any paved ways, nor any wheeled vehicles in view. It was simply an expanse of small dwellings of undistinguished appearance.

None was over a single story in height. They were scattered over a very large area. They were not even rectangular but had straight walls and curved ones as if at their occupants' fancy. There were, here and there, small patches of the communally-growing trees and occasional irregular patches of brushwood.

At first glance it looked rather like the casual encampment of savages who would move on when the idea pleased them. On second glance the effect of impermanence vanished. There was informality in the arrangement and in the structures themselves but there was a pattern too. And the houses looked better as one studied them a second time.

But Lon did not look again. He had eyes only for a huge metal sphere on the ground just where the hillside began to rise steeply toward a crest some thousands of feet high. The sphere was all of forty feet in diameter, and it was plainly constructed of metal plates welded to an inner stronger frame.

AS he looked, an enormous section of the mountainside lifted, disclosing a monstrous opening all of sixty feet high and a hundred broad. There was blank darkness within it. And as the opening yawned the metal globe moved smoothly over green turf—not even tracking it—and disappeared in the darkness.

The great door tilted down and settled into place. There was nothing in view but green-clad hillsides and the curiously tranquil jungle with its clumped communities of trees, and the

sprawled-out city which at first glance looked like the casual encampment of savages.

The plane slowed in its flight and settled down without a run. It was close by one of the houses. There was a small shelter before it—obviously intended as a storage-place. It was, in fact, a private hangar. And Lon saw similar shelters close to or incorporated in each of the two or three other buildings near enough to be examined.

The pilot casually opened the exit-port in the plane's side and slid out. The four Earth-people wormed their way uncomfortably out and to the ground. The small-people chattered cheerfully, and one of the girls began to hand out an assortment of small game.

There were two of the big-eyed air-gliding creatures with the ganoid scales. There was a feathered thing with incredible iridescent plumage. There was almost a colony of tiny creatures with irresistibly humorous solemn faces and tiny paws folded as if in prayer.

The small-man girl smiled at them as she handed them over. The six small-folk had evidently been upon a hunting-party by plane when the survivors of the *Marintha* fell in with them but whether they hunted for food or sport or pets could not be told.

Certainly the number of small creatures around the houses was greater than in the jungle. Many more things of small size could be seen at a glance than they'd seen in all their journeying.

"I'm stumped!" said Lon helplessly. "But they're civilized! Only a civilized race could make a door like that and a metal object that large! But—"

Other little people appeared, walking lightly toward them. They looked at the Earth-folk with enormous interest but no surprise whatever. Which was disturbing, because the hunting-party members had been starkly astonished—or had they? They were in ambush. Maybe they were astonished only at being overcome. In any case word had come on ahead about them. But how?

The newcomers grinned at the six who had found the Earthlings. Trilling speech surrounded them. There was laughter. It was such good-humored laughter as old acquaintances exchange when one of their number has had a humorous mishap befall him.

The pilot of the plane brought one of the small-men to Lon and spoke in an apparent form of introduction. The other small-man grinned, his eyes crinkling deeply at the corners. The small-folk eyes were longer than Earth eyes. Lon put out his hand.

The small-man looked at it and put out his own. Lon shook it. The small-man looked surprised, then chuckled. He put out his hand again.

For minutes the four Earthlings were kept busy shaking hands. Each newcomer learned of the odd custom and immediately tried it with each of the four Earth people. Once they had made the round they tried it all over again. They considered it humorous. Presently they were shaking hands with each other to delighted laughter.

"Confound it!" growled Lon, sunk in gloom again. "They're only children! They haven't a serious thought in their heads!"

"The highest standard of education ever known," said Caryl's father drily, "was in ancient Athens, and they were notoriously always looking for some new thing. It occurs to me, Lon, that the difference between a savage and a citizen of the highest possible culture wouldn't be so great on the surface.

"They'd both have leisure and they'd both be completely unworried about everyday affairs. They'd both feel completely secure. We might be looking at either status. It's the in-between people like us of Earth who worry and fret."

ONE of the girls who'd been in the plane came back from the near by house. She carried a sheet of what looked like milk-white plastic. She handed it casually to the man to whom Lon had been presented and he sketched quickly. Lines and shadings appeared with startling clarity. He showed it to

Lon. Lon gave a little sigh of relief.

"I'm going in where that metal globe disappeared," he told Caryl. "They want to talk machinery to me. You can enjoy yourself with their cuteness!"

He strode away, following his new guide. It was a walk of some length but there was no ground-transportation. The life of the small-men was evidently lived at a very leisurely tempo, which there was no way to speed up in time of emergency like the present.

There was a small door let into the hillside. Inside was a long, deep tunnel of a size to cramp a man of Lon's height. The light overhead baffled him entirely. It looked like a ribbon of plastic which glowed without heat and made the tunnel as bright as day.

Then, too, the question arose of why an underground installation had been built in the first place. If for safety against attack, it would promise real help for the Earthlings. It would imply warfare and weapons and very probably space-ships.

Or—but this idea Lon regarded with doubt—there might be some other form of life in symbiosis with the small-people and this other form of life might have intelligence and prefer to be underground.

The guess was far-fetched. Both were. And both were wrong. Presently the tunnel ended and there was a truly gigantic cavern, with cross-ribbons of the same illuminant on its hundred-foot-high ceiling, and there were several cryptic masses of motionless metal in the center. The motionless objects were electrical, Lon was sure.

Two of them were seventy feet high—the height of a seven-story building—and sixty around their bases, and they were of bewildering simplicity. But flickering blue glows—straight corona-effects—hovered about certain of their parts and somehow there was the feeling of incalculable power in them.

Small-men labored within the forty-foot globe. They popped into view from its interior, and went to a small door on the far side of the cavern, and came back carrying small loads which they

took into the inside of the globe again. They turned their heads to look at Lon and grin at him as he followed toward another small door not far from the one they used.

Here was a closed room with a soft carpet and a blank end-wall. A beaming little man—quite the oldest of the small-men Lon had seen—rubbed his hands exuberantly as Lon came in. He waved his hand at the blank wall.

The lights went out and a picture in color appeared there. It was vastly more true in tinting than Earthly vision-screens. It began with a picture of a bomb-crater—a space a half-mile across blasted clean of everything and lined with a molten glassy stuff.

The picture was taken from the air. The plane from which it had been taken plainly wavered and wobbled in the air-currents on which it floated. Lon knew somehow that this was the bomb-crater left by the bomb which had vaporized the *Marintha*.

The picture held for a space. Then it flicked off. And then there appeared an extraordinary view of swirling vapor which Lon blinked at blankly. It had all the violence of an explosion, only it wasn't one. It was an implosion—an explosion in reverse.

Lon was too confused to realize what he was seeing until all the swirlings ended and suddenly the tumult cleared away and he looked down from a seemingly quite steady platform in mid-air at the vanished *Marintha*. He caught his breath sharply.

Then he saw moving figures. He saw himself and Caryl and Burton and Caryl's father. The figures were unmistakable but the action was impossible. All four human figures were running and scrambling backward toward the small doomed space-ship.

They reached its side and leaped up backward, landed on its upper side and slithered down into its interior. Then the port closed, and the ship up-ended, turned end-for-end and moved skyward.

Now the point-of-vision of the viewing instrument followed. Up and up the ship went, tumbling in its rise. The sky

above it turned dark and streaks of fire that looked like frozen lightning winked into being and struck it. It continued to rise and others missed it—all on one side—and it retreated into space.

"You saw this?" demanded Lon aloud in his astonishment. "But why run the film backward?"

HE stared in utter incredulity as the adventures of the *Marintha* were followed in reverse on the screen—back, all the way back to the attack by the slug-shaped ship off a chlorine planet near the Crab Nebula. And then back beyond that through weeks of journeying toward that system—and then the images grew hazy and indistinct and then there were no more.

The lights came on and the two small-men looked at him hopefully. Lor knitted his brows.

"You ran the film backward," he said, groping. "Was that—was that the way you saw it? Good gosh! Can you track a thing back in time?" His voice rose in pitch. "Can you focus on a thing today and track it back into yesterday and see what happened? Did you go back as far as your instruments will take you?"

He was struck speechless. The two small-men nodded to each other. They seemed satisfied. The screen lighted again. Lon saw the projected record take up again at the moment the slug-ship had first fired on the *Marintha*.

Here the focus was changed somehow to the atmosphere-fin which had been the first object blasted from the *Marintha's* hull. That stayed in focus on the screen. And he saw the unpleasant yellow planet rotating slowly beyond the bit of wreckage.

He saw the other slug-shaped ships rising from its surface and flashing into overdrive with that strange momentary flashing of all the colors of the rainbow at once. Then the planet's rotation seemed to speed up—indicating the passage of time—and it slowed again and another and much larger fleet took off.

"You've edited the film," said Lon numbly. "So this is how you know all

about us! The first of your people didn't seem to know. They listened—I see! They checked to see whether I'd be telling the exact truth. And I did.

"They knew because that plane went and shot the crater, and then you were able to go back in time and see what caused it. Or maybe you had to wait until your plane got back with your record and you didn't broadcast it to them until you'd seen what the record said." He grew confused. "I'm getting mixed up! Go ahead!"

He prepared to see more marvels. He did. The viewing device which had been able to separate and cling to a shot-off bit of metal fin, weeks in the past and thousands on thousands of parsecs away, now showed the undestroyed *Marintha* stationary in space.

Its viewpoint approached the ship and entered it. Lon saw the now-vaporized little yacht in a series of cross-sections as if it had been sliced through again and again. This was television of a new sort entirely.

Later, he learned that this particular device required another time-stratum than its own to work in. It could not examine in the present, but only in the past of an object on which it was focused. And it could not move into the future by as much as the thousandth of a second. But it was television on a scale unimaginable to earthly science.

"All right," said Lon dazedly, when this was done with. "What do you want now? What's the exhibition for? I'm probably crazy and having delusions but go ahead! What now?"

He was literally dazed by the incredible things he had seen and by their implications. He was almost stunned by these vistas of a science mankind had not dreamed of. Obviously, he realized numbly, if time is a dimension like length and breadth, apparatus could be imagined to explore it when given a conducting medium into the past. But it was so new a concept that his mind balked. It was not even dreamed of among men. But here it worked!

He waved his hands helplessly. The screen lighted again. There was a bit

of machinery in the *Marintha*, quite stationary and very much enlarged. The viewing-device sectioned it all through. The lights came on.

The two small-men, chattering hopefully, led Lon through a door into an adjoining room. It was a workshop of sorts, though there was no single tool in it that he could recognize. There were metal parts on a bench. The small-men pointed to them and very hopefully waited to see what he would do.

It was night and Lon's expression was one of sheer stark raving unbelief when he joined Caryl and the others in the house near which their plane had landed. There were many of the little folk there, and the sound of the girls' voices was like the clear, fluting voices of birds. Caryl was trying to learn the language and it seemed to be an uproarious performance. But she saw Lon's white incredulous face and came to him quickly.

"What's the matter, Lon?" she asked anxiously. "You've had a shock!"

"Shock?" said Lon bewilderedly. "That's no word for it! These people have everything! With their equipment we men—there's no limit to what we could do! But"—he said it in a querulous, unbelieving voice—"of all the stuff in the *Marintha's* equipment that they could have chosen—they've been trying to duplicate her garbage-disposal unit and make it work! And that's what they want me to help them with!"

CHAPTER VI

Alien Science

THE sunrise next morning was a very beautiful one. Lon heard flute-like trillings and he heard Caryl's laugh. He got up and slipped into his clothes. He had to duck to go through the toy-sized doors of the house—the ceilings were hardly two inches above the top of his head—and his exit into the morning was undignified.

Outside Caryl loomed above the

slender delicately formed girls of the small race. She had adopted their costume as a mildly venturesome jest and ruddy tinted rays of the just-risen sun made her a startlingly effective figure with the clustered elfin others about her. High delighted laughter arose as she fled at the sight of Lon.

He stayed outside. The air smelled wonderfully fresh and new. All the vegetation was covered with glittering dew-drops, each one seeming a ruby in the crimson sunlight. And there were streaks of cloud to the eastward and all the horizon was a glory of colored light.

Burton and Caryl's father came out a little later. Lon was staring about him with a sort of baffled anger because this was a very beautiful world and it was horrible to think that today, quite certainly, it was to undergo an attack its people could not possibly resist. Very probably the chlorine-breathers of the slug-ship fleet would not even try to land upon it.

But if a mere patrol-ship was equipped to do battle so many light-years from home and carried the material for at least two atomic-bomb war-heads for guided missiles as a matter of course—then surely such a fleet as was now on the way would be able to saturate this planet's whole atmosphere with atomic-bomb debris.

They might do it merely from the same sort of blood lust that had appeared in the unwarned attack of the *Marintha's* pursuer. But an alien race with space-ships would always represent a possible danger to any other culture. It would require no unprecedented arrogance to make the chlorine-breathers merely decide in cold blood to wipe out any possible enemy.

"Morning," said Burton. He breathed deeply of the fragrant morning air. "Days must be pretty long on this planet and the nights too. I usually knock off my eight hours but this morning I feel more rested than usual. I wonder if our friends serve breakfast? The condemned man is ready for his morning meal."

"The slug-fleet's due today," said Lon

hardly." And our friends were putting garbage-disposal units together when I left the cave. Quite skilfully, with the help of some shapeless objects I have to assume were machine-tools and which seemed to be learning the whole process quite readily. Those tools are marvels. But—garbage-disposal units!"

Caryl's father said meditatively, "Somehow I have confidence in our small friends. They are human, remember. Not our species, of course—it wouldn't seem likely—but human. And it's human to worry. They'd be worrying if there were any reason for it."

Lon shook his head. "After I showed them the trick of putting the things together I talked to them by way of pictures and whatnot. They've no defense against atom bombs. None whatever. They don't use atomic power.

"They've some tricky way of using the surface heat of their planet. They transform it into electric energy direct. Their sun replaces all they can use a hundred times over. And they broadcast it. That cave is one of their transformer-stations."

"You told us last night," said Burton, yawning. "It's some sort of skin-effect business so the power's all over the planet on the surface and nowhere else. Did you find out what slowed the *Marintha's* fall, Lon?"

"Their broadcast power," said Lon moodily. "It's tricky, making a skin-effect current over a globe, even when you put your current sources underground, as they naturally have to. But the field has some side effects. It tries to make a sort of vertical stasis.

"It resists the up-and-down motion of all energy-containing objects but not their lateral movement. The effect varies as the square of the vertical speed of the object and also diminishes with distance. The resistance to vertical movement begins to be appreciable at about six feet a second and goes up.

"There are all sorts of consequences. We hit the fringe of the effect at a hundred-twelve miles a second. It started to slow us before we hit atmosphere, though we didn't know it. The closer we

got to the ground, the lower the speed it began to work at and of course the greater effect on an object of given velocity."

BURTON said drily, "If I shot that antique gun of ours horizontally, the bullet would travel a long way. But if I shot it straight up the bullet would be held up and the gun would burst. Right?"

"Probably," said Lon. "It means they can't have strong vertical wind-currents, hence no strong lateral ones. They don't have violent wind-storms and no hurricanes at all. It means that an air-jet in a tube pointed down has a terrific reaction. The broadcast power tries to keep the air from descending too fast.

"So they lift their planes straight up by turning compressed air loose in tubes pointed straight down and then driving them ahead by similar blasts aimed slanting down and backward. Since the wings push air down they have a terrific lift, too. All of which is a load on their power-plants, though.

"They have to be terrifically powerful because they inherently have to slow up all breezes on the planet's surface. But they couldn't slow up the blast of an atomic bomb. That was too much power applied too suddenly. The two bombs that have gone off blew their power-fuses.

"The first time all their planes crashed. The second time they had warning. Didn't do too much harm, though, because they fly low to get maximum lift from the stasis-effect. Anyhow their trees are spindling and mostly broke the falls. They got their fuses replaced a lot quicker the second time. Remember?"

Burton whistled. "That noise? The background noise like humming that you can always hear. It went off and on again while we were up in the pass."

"That's another side-effect," said Lon. He shrugged. "Yes. It carries broadcast stuff, too. They use code at about twenty thousand cycles audio-frequency—too shrill for our ears to catch but not for

theirs. Almost like the squeak of a bat, which most children can hear but most adults can't. They can listen to it or ignore it. Convenient."

Caryl's father said warmly, "It's as I said, Lon! They've put technology in its place! Their machines are small and efficient and they keep them out of sight and live very comfortably—as unworried and as unweariedly as savages. They're as completely adapted to the mechanics of their way of life as savages used to be on Earth."

"But we still struggle with our contraptions. We're still conscious of our machinery. We have to watch it and oil it and supervise it and tinker with it. We're practically savages by comparison!"

"We are?" said Lon savagely. "But they're playing with garbage-disposal units! With ion-rockets! I left half a dozen of their best brains puttering around with those crazy plastic things they use for automatic tools, trying to understand how a meteor-detector works!"

"They've got machines making them and they're taking them apart trying to understand them. And they're sweating over the mechanism of a Doole-Boyd storage battery! They found out how to make them from that gadget that takes pictures in the past but they don't know how they work!"

There was silence for a moment. Burton whistled tunelessly.

"The thing that hurts," said Lon bitterly, "is that if we men—Earthmen, that is—had a tenth of what they've got Earth would be safe! A couple of months with the gadgets these folks have and we could go to that yellow planet and smash it!"

"We could make the Galaxy safe for humankind. But they can't! With a slug-ship fleet due here today to start the business of wiping them out, they're trying to fathom the boundless mystery of a storage battery!"

He looked very tired. It was bitterness. The small folk had a science which was capable of anything but they had never needed to defend themselves, so

they had no weapons more dangerous than the ones Earth-ships had considered adequate. Earth was no better off.

"Still," said Caryl's father, "it's barely possible that they don't understand our machinery because it's too primitive. Prehistoric man used to make some queerly-shaped pieces of flint that we call scrapers for lack of a better name. But we really have no idea what they were used for."

"And how many civilized men would be able to understand a fire-drill or how it worked if he simply saw the device? Or an Aztec fire-wheel? He'd never have had need for a machine to make a fire with. Without special information would a civilized man be able to guess the purpose of a boomerang? Again—he'd never need anything like that! Maybe these people are bewildered for the same reason. Maybe they've never needed the things we depend on, Lon!"

LOON shook his head. He had given the small-men what information they wanted about devices they had incredibly photographed on the *Marintha* after she had ceased to exist. But he saw no hope of any sort.

He was prepared to do battle with his bare hands, not only for distant Earth but for Caryl's life and his own. But he was doomed, apparently, to mere impotent waiting for the death the slug-ships would presently pour down upon this planet.

There were figures moving about the other houses of this settlement of the small-folk. A plane rose in the still-rosy light of dawn. It looked childishly crude. It went over toward the hillsides where the huge concealed doorway opened upon a most unlikely cavern. It settled to the ground again.

Another plane rose and moved to the same place and settled. Others, by ones and twos and it seemed hundreds. The first planes to land then rose again. They went winging off leisurely into the dawn.

There was at least one plane attached to each of the quaintly individualized dwellings of this community, and every

one rolled out of its shelter and flew comfortably to the one place, there landed and presently rose again and went off. They had not all the same destination. They scattered in every possible direction.

Presently the unhurried mass-movement seemed to dwindle, and as it ended other planes began to arrive from somewhere else. Another city, most likely. This was a swarming of the planes which seemed toys for make-believe. There were so many of them that they looked like a flight of low-flying locusts. Actually, they were well into the hundreds in number.

Some of them landed. The others hovered as if in no hurry at all. But nevertheless there was continuous movement. When one grounded plane rose again and went wheeling around the column of the ones which waited, another settled.

There was a steady thick stream of the planes heading back in the direction from which all had come.

"They're doing something!" said Burton. "Let's go look."

They walked. There was no ground-transportation here. And the thick mass of planes from what might be called the south had diminished to a very small number before they reached the glade by the hidden door. A third flight of planes, numbering at least a thousand, was coming into sight over the jungle from the north.

It was full morning now and the red tints to eastward had almost faded away. Planes were landing all about as they neared the place on which all the inexplicable air-traffic centered. The great door was not quite closed.

It was open a bare half-dozen feet, and under its ponderous valve a string of busy small crude-seeming machines rolled out and rolled back. They were something like tractors with long low platform bodies.

They rolled upon treads which were not quite wheels but were certainly not caterpillar-tracks.

Each, as it came out, was heavily burdened with curious objects of plastic

some four feet long by a foot in diameter—very large objects for men their size to handle.

The small-men guiding the trucks grinned amiably at the three Earthmen. A truck stopped and small-men hopped out of planes and each one seized one of the ungainly objects and staggered back to his plane with it.

He pushed it through the door. He went back for a second and third and fourth, which he disposed of in the same way. Then he climbed back into his plane and it went straight up with a hissing sound and swept away on its return journey.

There happened to be just one of the objects left on the nearest truck, and Lon approached it blankly. The driver grinned amiably at him. He looked like an impish child, sitting on the slightly raised seat with the make-believe-like stick in his hand for the truck's only control.

Lon peered in one open end of the plastic device. It was essentially a foot-across tube of plastic, open at both ends. But Lon could look inside.

He said helplessly, "There's a meteor-detector at one end with a garbage-disposal unit behind it and I think a storage battery behind that. At the other end there's an ion-rocket tube with some deviation-coils to shift the reaction-beam of the rocket. That's all!"

"What the heck do they want? Maybe it'll fly after a fashion with an ion-rocket to push it. But what do they want with flying garbage-disposal units?"

A SMALL-MAN reached out his arms and Lon surrendered the object. The little man nodded in friendly fashion and went staggering to his plane with it. More trucks came out. The four-foot-by-one-foot tubes were coming out of the cavern by hundreds and thousands. A remarkable job of mass-production had been performed overnight by the automatic tools underground. But Lon simply could not make head nor tail of it.

One of the small-men who had worked with Lon the night before beckoned to

him. Lon went with him. Small toylike planes continued to arrive empty and depart loaded for more than an hour. In all, some thousands of the tubes were carried away.

No more than a dozen remained on a last not-unloaded truck when all the planes had gone and the great metal globe came out from under the then fully opened door. They remained after the globe was gone.

BUT about noon, one of them was used. A small-man, sitting at ease on the truck, suddenly got down from the seat, briskly up-ended one of the tubes so that one end pointed skyward and pressed on a small stud in its side. For seconds nothing happened.

Abruptly the tube began to rise in the air with a swiftly fanning bluish luminescence behind it. It went upward steadily but without haste. It seemed to accelerate slightly as it dwindled with attained height. It vanished, still picking up speed. But it seemed all very commonplace and leisurely and matter-of-fact.

It was all of fifteen minutes before there appeared any consequence of its having taken off. Then a roiling, writhing tumult of yellow vapor appeared in the air a mile or two to the eastward. It descended with deliberation while vast columns of spouting orange-colored smoke spurted furiously, now up, now down, and now in every direction between.

The smoke moved much faster when parallel to the surface of the planet. It formed, in fact, a wierdly-shaped pancake of ominous yellow with writhing, unsubstantial arms. But it descended slowly.

When it reached the ground, nothing happened—nothing happened at all. Which, for a guided missile with an atomic-bomb warhead, was very remarkable indeed. Lon would have appreciated it but he was not present to watch.

He was somewhere else. He was out in space, his eyes burning, surging ahead into battle.

CHAPTER VII

Sporting Life

THE small folk were—so Lon considered with one part of his mind—a very sporting people. They had given him an intensive half-hour course of instruction in the handling of the forty-foot globe they had built and turned it over to him to fight.

Possibly they considered that, as a more primitive cousin and an experienced handler of space-craft, he might have a better instinctive grasp of the principles of space-fighting than they had. Or it might have seemed to them the sportsmanlike thing to do.

In any case they had done it, and there were half a dozen of them in the globe with him.

Their manner was that of sparkling-eyed excitement. Caryl's father and Burton were also on board the clumsy object. And when Caryl appeared—in her normal Earth-ship costume and flushing hotly when Lon first glanced at her—Lon explained curtly that the small-men had improvised a space-ship and that the three Earthmen were included in its crew. She very firmly climbed aboard too.

She would have had to be ejected by force, and it was not worth while. Lon at the time had no hope except to die fighting. The planet of the small-men, and Earth after it, seemed to him to be doomed. If Caryl were to die anyhow, she might as well do it in the space-ship with the others of the *Marintha's* crew. At any rate death in space would be clean and quick.

He took the ship up, first startled by its lack of response to power until the small-man beside him—he had been the pilot of the plane the day before—smiled deprecatingly and touched a sketch beside the instrument-board. Then Lon realized that vertical speed was limited by the power-field in a space-ship close to the planet.

The *Marintha* had crash-landed on this planet less than thirty hours before and the spoken-language problem was still unsolved. But a vocabulary of sketch-symbols had grown up which were actually ideographs. A sketch of a Doole-Boyd battery circuit, for example, needed only to be pointed at to indicate the subject under discussion.

It was rather amazing to see the number of tiny replicas of Lon's own sketches fixed in plain view for communication purposes. And not only sketches of objects were there. A sort of ideological shorthand had developed. There were verbs and even a few adjectives. For example, a nonworkable circuit, drawn and then crossed out, was plainly a symbol of "No" or "No good" or a negative generally.

A particularly clear simplification of an Earth-style device—actually not used—similarly meant "Yes" or "Good" or a general affirmative. The system was not as fast or as clear as really fluent speech, but with gestures and voice-intonation it served surprisingly well.

Lon then cut down the power. Taking off would be a lengthy process. There was nothing to be done until the stasis-effect of the power-field grew less. He took time to gaze about the interior of the ship. It was a simple hollow shell, braced with internal girders and surprisingly devoid of visible machinery.

At intervals about its curved wall there were small seats for the small-men, each equipped with straps against acceleration-shocks. There were larger ones for Lon and Burton and Caryl's father and one small-man was busily at work improvising another for Caryl beside Lon.

To right and left of Lon there were vision-screens which were remarkably clear and alive. Above and below were others and a smaller one which showed the view behind him—a back-view device. Merely by moving his eyes he could see clearly on every side of the ship.

Burton and Caryl's father had been provided with vision-screens and controls for weapons they suspected were duplicates of the slug-ship's rod-light-

ning projectors. The controls were imitations of sighted guns.

The Earthmen should be better with them than the small folk, who on their planet used gas-projectors requiring no accuracy in the hunt. Lon was to fight the ship. He had only a hazy notion of the effectiveness of the devices he had been given but there was nothing to be done save try them to whatever limits they might have.

The green land-areas and mountains of the planet seemed to flow together. Blue sea invaded the space below the ship. It began to rise more swiftly. Presently the blue sky darkened. Tiny specks of light which were stars appeared.

Then the sky was purple and abruptly black with the great ringed sun flaring luridly in emptiness. A thousand million stars seemed to watch as the improvised round space-craft bounced up out of atmosphere into space itself.

HERE there was evidently no hindrance to acceleration. Lon tried out the ship—cautiously at first, then with increasing freedom. The controls were designed for instinctive reaction, to take full advantage of the deep-rooted human instinct to believe oneself the center of all the universe.

It meant that one always tended to pull oneself toward any object desired, to push away from an undesirable one. There was a round comfortable hand-grip in a convenient position. When Lon pulled himself toward it the ship shot forward. When he pushed away the ship checked or retreated. To push the grip down made the ship rise. To pull up made it descend.

Even sidewise movement was possible and the globe and all its drive-units had plainly been designed so that its center of gravity and of thrust was always the pilot's seat. A lateral twist of the control even spun the ship about on its axis, and a vertical twist turned it upside down.

It was infinitely easy to learn to handle controls like that. It was hardly minutes before Lon felt a magnificent

confidence. The ship was, as far as its motion was concerned, practically an extension of himself.

He nodded grimly to the small-man who was his co-pilot. He touched the sketch of the slug-ship. He raised his eyebrows. The small-man threw a switch. A red ring of light appeared on his right-hand vision-plate. The slug-ship apparently would be in its center.

Simultaneously fainter blue circles appeared elsewhere over the vast swelling curved surface of the planet below. Lon glanced at them, but the small-man tapped the red ring with his finger. Then he tapped two or three of the blue rings and pointed to a sketch of the globe-ship itself.

"Sister ships, eh?" grunted Lon. "You chaps did work!"

He knew there were other caverns under the surface of the world below him. The demands for power for the broadcast-field which had to control even the surface-winds of the whole planet would be so enormous that many power-stations must exist to supply it.

But it had not occurred to him that his every look and gesture and intonation would have been conveyed to half a hundred or more such technological headquarters and that what the small-men in one knew all the others would know too. The communication-system—though he had seen no sign of it—must be remarkable.

The globe-ship shot swiftly toward the enemy which had trailed the *Marintha* over an improbable number of light-

years in overdrive. Detectors should be ringing on that ship now. It turned and hurtled toward him to offer battle.

At more than a thousand miles a rod-lightning beam shot out. It missed by hundreds of yards. Lon jerked the globe sidewise nearly into the space it had missed. A ravening group of six rods instantly stabbed through the spot he had left. His eyes gleamed.

"Ranging, eh?" he growled. "Two can play at that!"

He jerked the globe upward and called, "Burton! Take a pot-shot and hold the trigger down!"

A bar of seemingly solid incandescence leaped from his own ship toward the enemy. Lon saw that it missed. By pure reflex action his hand twisted the hand-grip before him, as if to correct the error in sighting. And it did.

The globe-ship spun slightly. The raging beam of pure energy sliced across the slug-ship and great gouts of vaporized metal flashed into being. The slug-ship plunged like a wounded thing and stabbed back furiously.

They plunged upon each other at incredible acceleration. Lon twisted his ship, using the energy-beam like a monstrous blade to slash at the misshapen other craft. Once, twice, three times he struck it. The fourth time there was a seeming explosion, and a huge mass of mistiness streamed out with the violence of a rocket-jet.

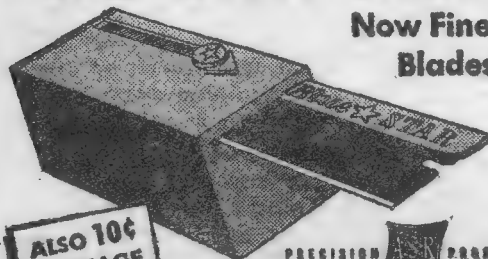
"Hulled him!" said Lon, his eyes burning. "Now—"

[Turn page]

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Then he groaned. The slug-ship, encountering an enemy capable of resistance, suddenly flared that incredible familiar color which is all colors at once and yet definitely not white. It is the flashing iridescence which accompanies the first phase of an overdrive field in formation.

The slug-ship was going into overdrive because it could not make a mere sporting event of destroying the human vessel. It was not yet badly hurt but—

The grinning little man beside Lon made a chuckling noise. His small sinewy fingers snapped home a plunger. The overdrive-field iridescence vanished and the slug-ship was still in normal space. Its flight into the stressed cosmos of overdrive was halted. Its retreat was cut off.

Its rod-lightning beams crashed again in a frenzy. It split space furiously with the monstrous pencils of power. It was less than a hundred miles away now and only the erratic dancing leaps of the globe-ship baffled its raging cannonade.

But Lon fought his ship as in single personal combat, with a shining sword-blade of energy before him. He fenced zestfully like a man with a rapier dancing about an opponent who flung spinning knives while the slender blade ripped and ripped at him.

He slashed and slashed, delicately. A second sudden burst of vapor—a colossal expanding cloud of chlorine atmosphere—the rod-lightning ceased. The slug-ship ceased to accelerate. It seemed dead in space. It hurtled on and on. Sixty miles, fifty, forty, thirty, twenty—no sign of life.

INSTINCTIVELY, Lon ceased his slashings. He watched intently. The small-man beside him was bubbling with laughter, despite the crazy gyrations in which Lon kept the globe-ship lest this be a trick.

"It looks like he's dead," he said dubiously.

But as the last word left his lips the slug-ship fired again. At less than five miles range it could not miss. The six rods of pure destructive energy stabbed

despairingly, ragingly out.

They hit the globe-ship squarely, all six of them. Lon caught his breath. There was a perceptible physical shock of impact. And the *Marintha* had been pierced through and through by every such bolt to touch her.

This ship was not. There was an instant in which it seemed that all of space was somehow straining. It felt almost like the odd shock of going into overdrive. Then the rod-lightning turned from mere incandescence into a blinding blue-white color. The rods ceased to exist. And the slug-ship glowed red, then white and flew apart in tormented metal vapor as it reached its point of closest approach to the globe, and then went hurtling onward through unresisting emptiness.

"Holy hoptoad!" said Lon, dazed. "You wanted him to hit us! When his beams hit you tied a knot in them and sent stuff back that simply vaporized his whole ship!" The twinkling mirth-filled eyes of the small-man beside him were fullest confirmation.

"But why fight him?" The small-man reached out and shook hands, his eyes zestfully excited. "Confound it!" said Lon slowly. "I'll bet you wanted to have a fight first for the sport of it!"

Then the blue rings on the vision-screens moved swiftly toward him and long rod-lightning beams reached out from each one and waved gleefully in emptiness and winked out. And shortly the globes of the small-man fleet were clustered about Lon's own ship, weaving and spinning in sportive dizzy evolutions. And the evolutions were those which Lon had used in his single combat. It was plain that the small-men approved of Lon quite heartily.

There were sixty or seventy of the globe-ships—Lon was never sure—and they made a respectable space-fleet. It was not a fleet which Earth could have built so readily nor equipped with such weapons. When tiny red circles began to wink into being all over the vision-screens he would have gathered them into some sort of formation to lead them to the attack.

But there was—he realized it with a sinking heart—no possible formation which would intercept attack upon the planet. The slug-ships, newly-arrived and avid for destruction, were coming out of overdrive all through a half-million-mile sphere of emptiness. Each one went hurtling toward the green planet at full acceleration.

But the globe-ships swept out to meet them. There were slug-ships by hundreds, and the defenders were outnumbered five and six to one, but their gallant sword-beams stabbed out and slashed through the chill void between the planets, and the massed beams of the slug-ships darted out furiously.

The globes fought as Lon had done, zestfully dancing like motes amid their enemies and seeking to engage in something like formal duels. But the slug-ships were not concerned with punctilio. Here and there a globe and a single slug-ship fought it out to the end but in general it was the policy of the attackers to concentrate in overwhelming numbers upon individual small-man ships and overwhelm them with lightnings.

Which was a mistake. The englobing monsters sent their blasts ravening home—and nothing whatever happened to the target-globes. But the slug-ships glowed incandescent and exploded as their walls went soft from heat.

Those who had not been so unfortunate as to score a hit now instantly glittered with the overdrive-field energy in immediate attempt to flee since they had encountered dangerous resistance. But they could not escape. Overdrive was dead to them. Surrender apparently did not occur to them.

All the vast emptiness in which the battle proceeded, now suddenly became filled with writhing, curling coils of vapor. Guided missiles went shrieking soundlessly among the stars. And one after another of the slug-ships flamed and burst and the survivors acted like cornered rats—and there were thousands of smoke-trails streaking toward the planet.

Lon snapped feverish orders and Bur-

ton and Caryl's father—who alone understood him—tried desperately to snipe the deadly things, revealed by their trails of yellow vapor. Burton did detonate one and for an instant there was a flare of atomic fire much brighter than the unshielded ringed sun.

And Lon was flinging the globe-ship down to try to intercept more, when his co-pilot chuckled and shook his head. He looked as if he liked Lon rather more than before just then but he pointed to a smoke-trail as it sped planetward and turned a control Lon had not noted.

The screen became an enormous magnifying telescope. It brought the diving guided missile to view as a dot, then as a somehow revolting wormlike form, large enough so that the absolute absence of any detail on its surface could be seen.

AND then, suddenly, an equally improbable thing came darting to meet it. This other thing was an open-ended tube with a rapidly fanning blue corona-discharge glow at its tail. It was, in effect, a section of flying plastic stove-pipe.

It hurtled upon the guided missile, made contact and clung. And suddenly there were swirling vapors and tiny flames. The guided missile checked in its course. Its furiously jetting rocket-trail did not cease but the plastic-tube device clung to it and flames gnawed at the alien thing.

Lon swore softly, staring. "A garbage-disposal unit!" he said, stunned. "You fixed up a meteor-detector in a stove-pipe to find flying missiles in the sky. You added an ion-rocket to drive it and a garbage-disposal unit to break down some included wetted trash to oxygen and hydrogen and carbon and ash.

"And you've got those gadgets meeting the atom-bombs as they come down! They play what amounts to an oxy-hydrogen jet on them! It won't destroy the explosive, of course, but it will melt and wreck any detonation-system. And when they land you'll pick up what's left and have a very nice supply of atomic explosive."

His co-pilot did not understand his Earthman speech. But when Lon put out his hand the small-man shook it exuberantly.

An hour later the globe-ship landed. Lon felt distinctly rueful about the whole business, but Caryl's father was pleased.

"After all, Lon," he observed, "even if we did bring the slug-ships after us we brought these folks some interesting if primitive devices. And they needed them. The slug-creatures would have found them sooner or later just as they are bound to find Earth.

"When we arrived they were in the situation of a civilized man at the mercy of a savage armed with a bow and arrow. A superson absorber will defend one against a superson pistol, but it would be useless against an arrow.

"For that one needs armor—a primitive defense against a primitive weapon. You gave them the armor they needed. Incidentally you—we—all of us—have made what should be a valuable contact for Earth. Another human race—"

Lon frowned. "They're so far ahead of us," he said uneasily, "that they could conquer us if they wanted to. And that's bad!"

"Lon!" said the older man severely. "They're civilized! Civilized men don't want to conquer other men!"

That, it turned out, was wholly true. The further proceedings of the small-men against the people of the chlorine planet were essentially civilized. All over their planet, by hundreds of thousands, the stove-pipe-like devices had been ready.

Of the more than two thousand atomic missiles discharged against the planet exactly two reached the surface and detonated. The others were all intercepted and made harmless before they landed. And the small-men gathered up the warheads and—after interested discussion with Lon—contrived two remote controlled space-navigators.

There had been a dozen or more of the slug-ships hulled and captured relatively intact by the globe-ships besides the enormously greater number vapor-

ized. Three of the hulled ships were included in each of the navigators. One of the navigators went up and headed for the Crab-nebula neighborhood in overdrive. It was intended to be intercepted by the second slug-ship fleet.

If the slug-creatures attempted to open communication with it—if they landed upon it—if they adopted any other policy than that of instant and unwarned attack—they would find three of their first fleet, neatly holed and wrecked, returned to them with a full half of the first fleets' atomic explosive.

They would have a warning against further attack in the carcasses of their shattered ships. But they would also have assurance that the destroyers of the first fleet desired nothing of them, hence the return of so much infinitely valuable atomic explosive.

But if the slug-fleet instantly and savagely attacked the robot navigator, without first attempting communication, the results would be catastrophic. Half the atomic explosive intended to blast a planet would go off in the middle of the fleet.

Rather worse, with it would explode a considerably greater mass of matter which normally could not be detonated at all, but would break down to sheer, raw energy when an atomic explosion acted on it like a primer.

The second navigator took to space a week after the first. If the first ship was able to give its message, well and good. The second would reinforce it. But if the first ship were attacked, the second would go on past the thinning vapor which would be all that was left of a slug-ship fleet and presently deliver exactly the same message and the same choice of peace or destruction to the chlorine-breathers' planet. The small-men were amiably prepared to leave the chlorine-breathers alone. But after all, if they wanted to fight—

BUT Lon and Caryl and Burton and Caryl's father did not wait to learn of the result of that scrupulously just ultimatum. They headed back to Earth in the globe-ship Lon had cap-

tained, a trifle more fully equipped for long-distance space-voyaging with cabins and bunks and a galley and food-supplies.

No small-men would consider accompanying them. They had arranged their planet and its climate and its vegetation to suit them. They had at every instant a complete service of everything they wanted, including companionship and leisure and an environment to which they were exactly suited. They were wholly comfortable and satisfied.

Lon had promised to return with all the facts they could possibly be interested in about all sciences and all other worlds. But they would never care about leaving their own. It would be unspeakably boring for them to be away from home.

They liked the four Earth-people, though. They loaded what space was

available with gifts they thought would be appreciated. And Lon hated to leave because he was just beginning to grasp some of the principles of the small-men's science. Caryl liked it even less. She got along famously with the girls and was beginning to learn the language.

But they had to go, of course. They had to warn Earth of the possible continued existence of a bloodthirsty chlorine-breathers' culture, and of the measures that should be taken for self-protection.

And too there was a small formality they wanted to go through which could only be managed back on Earth. They intended to return to the planet of the small-men.

They meant to spend much of their honeymoon there. But Caryl wanted to be married in a veil.



"That Pen — Writes by Itself!"

EVERY time Rena Corsen came in the door of Microwave Section, it cost Atlantic Engineering exactly one dollar and thirty-two cents. Because everybody stopped work to look at her. George Brooks felt very lucky to be the man she would marry, and to have her working beside him as an Electronics reporter. As she sat copying formulas, George was amazed at the speed with which the symbols seemed to flow into the pages of her book. Suddenly he leaned forward.

"That pen—it wiggles!" He pointed to the pen in her hand.

"Oh, that," she said. "It's just a gadget. Supposed to be good even in spaceships—if one should last that long."

"Let me see it."

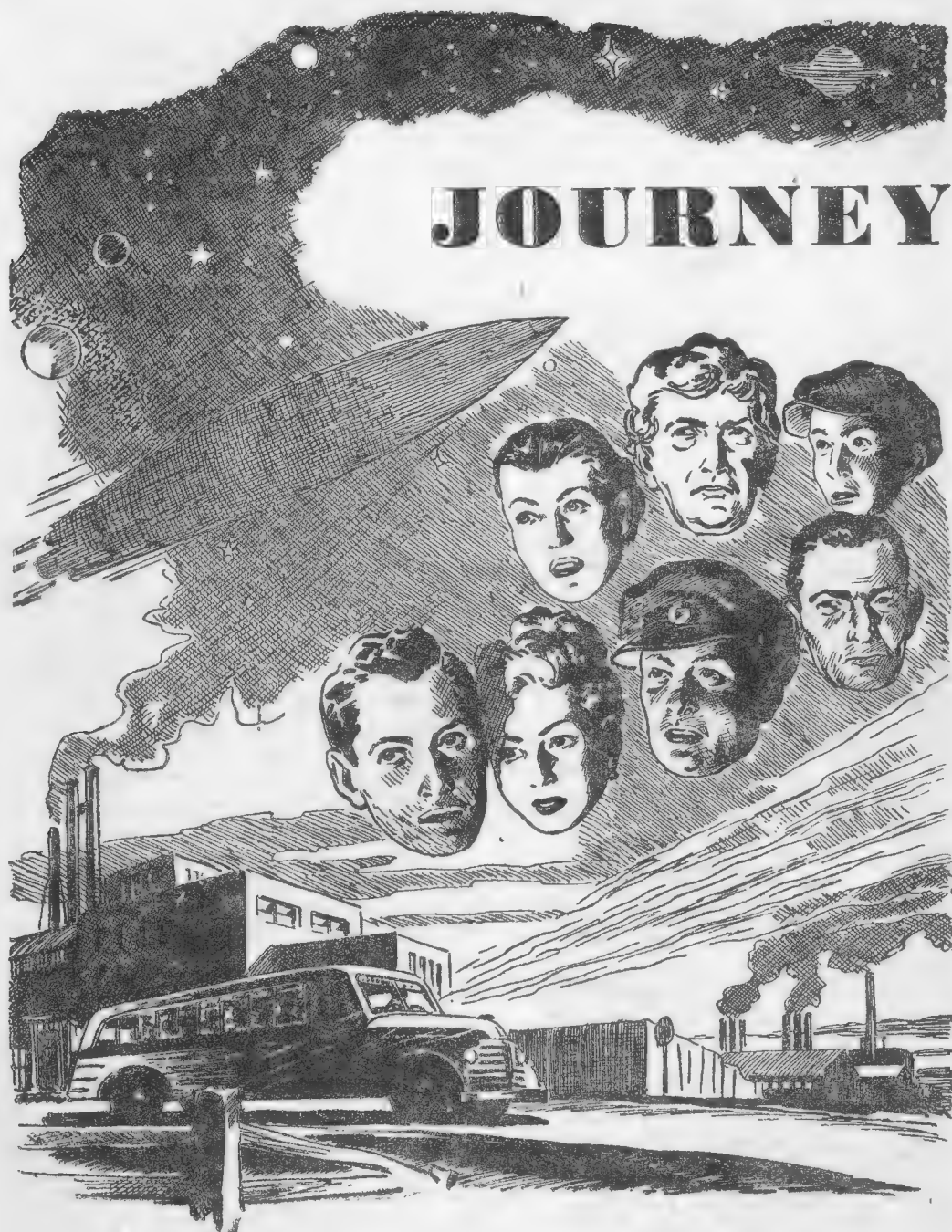
"It's supposed to make writing faster."

George tried the pen and exclaimed, "Well, I'll be jiggered. The darn thing seems almost to go by itself!"

Rena forgot to retrieve the pen, and George spent the rest of the day experimenting with it. It left him completely baffled, until—

"That pen," explained Rena, "was made twenty-six hundred years ago—or rather, from now!"

The unique pen is not the only strange thing about Rena, as George Brooks discovers in **SUNDAY IS THREE THOUSAND YEARS AWAY**, an amazing novelet of the present and future by Raymond F. Jones. It's a masterly tale of scientific adventure and romance in space and time—in which the strange pen is a symbol that links two eternities. Look forward to this magnificent novelet—next issue!



It seemed utterly senseless, that accident which made superfolk out of the folk on the bus—but was there a larger pattern behind it?

JOURNEY



It seemed utterly senseless, that accident which made superfolk out of the folk on the bus—but was there a larger pattern behind it?

for SEVEN

A Novelet by

JOHN D. MacDONALD

CHAPTER I

The Characters



THE frame of the big blue and silver bus was faintly out of line, just enough so that it seemed to sidle along with a whipped and discouraged air. The sign on the front indicated that it was on the ten-mile run from Bell City to the suburb of Stockland, a long tiring run through a jungle of stop lights, a tangle of neon, through the rich strong scent of the industries along the river.

Stan Weaver, the burly and florid driver, his hat shoved back so that a strand of blonde silky hair fell across his forehead, chomped hard on his thick cud of gum and fought the wheel. The bus had a tendency to wander. His lunch, eaten too quickly, was a knot in his stomach, and the afternoon sun made the asphalt ahead quiver in the heat waves.

Not enough sleep. Up too late last night with the little one, fretting on account of his new teeth. Always had to get up with 'em. Madge, blast her eyes, never got out of the sack. Having them was enough, she said. Overslept and got down late and they'd given him this unruly beast of a misbegotten bus, loaded with rattles. Dirty plugs too. Kept stalling at the lights.

A molar was aching steadily and there



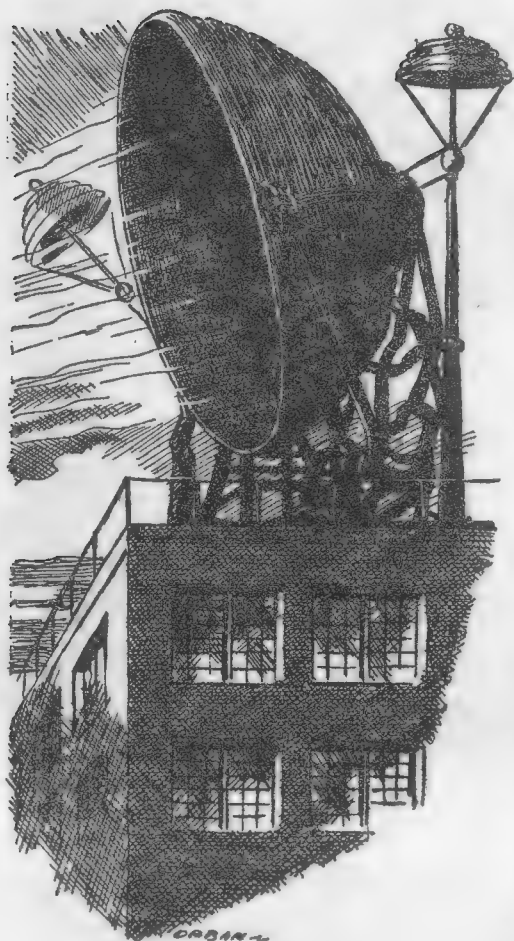
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was a patch of heat rash across the small of his back from contact with the leather bucket seat. He had been snarling and growling at the passengers all day. Why not? With three kids and a mortgage and bad teeth and a lazy wife and take-home pay of forty-nine-fifty, a guy had a right, didn't he? Should have stayed on the bread route. But Madge, yapping about security . . .

The light changed suddenly and he slammed on the brakes, taking a small malicious satisfaction out of really rocking them back there. He glanced in the big vision mirror. Hardly worth the trip. Only six of them. He thought of the joker who'd taken his bus to Florida. That was the answer. Be a better idea if there was only one passenger, though—that dolly sitting there back on the left by the window.

Shirley Sanger lifted her head and saw the driver's eyes reflected in the mirror. She saw the gleam of interest. She gave him a long cold bored look. Even if Jeremy doesn't like it, I can still slay the bus drivers. And the delivery boys and the cop on the corner.

Full blown, that's good old Shirley. What had Jeremy said? Oh, yes—a Reubens type. That had sounded fine until she'd seen a Reubens. Was there any law that said a gal five foot eight couldn't carry a hundred and forty-four pounds? Besides, the waist was as slim as girls half her size. It made buying clothes a problem.

SHE yawned, muffling her mouth with the back of her hand, squinting blue eyes tight shut. She wore her golden hair swept high as she believed that had a slimming effect. Her dress was rumpled. Terrible time to be getting home from a date.

She almost giggled out loud, wondering what Jane must have thought when she saw Shirley's unused bed this morning. She shared a cheap flat with Jane on a side street in Stockland. Then she thought of Jeremy and the urge to giggle died abruptly.

Mark old Shirley up as a fool. She wondered why she had expected a pro-

posal instead of a proposition from Jeremy. The night before she had tried to talk herself into thinking half a loaf was better than none. His apartment was very masculine. It might have worked until Jeremy opened the closet and threw her a woman's terry cloth robe and said, "This will fit, I think."

At the door he had tried to put up more than an argument. There was one advantage in being a big girl. There had been a lot of shoulder behind the left hook she planted in his stomach. He was still gasping audibly as she walked down the hall. Myra was surprised but glad to put her up for the night. The buses had stopped running. Taxi fare was exorbitant at that hour.

She wondered if she dared smoke a cigarette. She glanced across the aisle and saw a dark young man with a lighted cigarette cupped in his hand. There was stubble on his jaw and his hand shook. Hangover, she thought, with a tinge of sympathy.

Bill Dorvan took one more drag on the cigarette, dropped it to the dirty bus floor and rubbed it out with his shoe. The bus ride had been a foul idea. He had been walking aimlessly and had paused at a corner when the bus pulled up. Maybe it was just a subconscious yen to get away from himself.

The night before was a fetid and clouded memory of bars, of jukes, of women with bad teeth, of bar flies who hung close in hopes of a round. Not knowing how he had gotten to the cheap little hotel room was bad. Blackouts were bad. There had been too many of them in the last month. About seventy bucks left in the bank. Time to plan before hitting skid row.

Yet how could a man plan when the meaning had gone out of everything? The end of the world had been a crisp note propped against the toaster on the breakfast table. Sandra had been music, fire, delight. He guessed he had been too dull for her—too staid and properly ambitious and well-scrubbed. He had been a fool to think that Sandra could be cooped in a suburban house. Only a boid in a gilded cage.

The heck with it. He would ride to the end of the line and back. By then it would be the cocktail hour. A boiler-maker is a delightful cocktail. Food and drink combined. Hops are food, aren't they?

He dug the last cigarette out of a rumpled pack. As he bent to light it a firm hand tapped his shoulder and a level voice said, "If you don't mind, young man. There is a city ordinance about smoking on public conveyances."

He gave the iron face of the elderly woman behind him a quick glance. It made his head ache worse to turn. He wanted to snarl at her but the words came out, "Sorry, ma'am."

Mrs. Thompson leaned back in her seat. Quite a polite young man in spite of the shave he needed so badly and the suit that could stand pressing. She had been tensed for insolence, prepared to blast him with several dozen well-chosen words if he had had the impunity to put up an argument.

Her bundle of groceries was beside her on the seat. She took great satisfaction in them. A widow living on a meagre pension couldn't be foolish with money. The bus fare, round-trip, came to thirty-seven cents. The supermarket in Bell City had advertised prices that enabled her to save sixty-eight cents on the week's staples. Profit, thirty-one cents.

In ten weeks, three dollars and ten cents—enough for a bottle of that brandy, a pint bottle. In ten weeks she could sit and sip that brandy from a teacup in the kitchen and when it was all gone she would be able to cry about Harry. He had been dead for nine years, may he rest, and without the brandy it was impossible to do a good job of mourning him.

Without the brandy all she could remember was the enormous relief she had felt when the house no longer echoed with his whining complaining voice. Too bad Harry hadn't been as well set up and dependable looking as that man two seats ahead.

The man two seats ahead was named Ad McGoran. Mr. McGoran was a very

intelligent and prosperous man. Certain interests had imported him from a city twelve hundred miles away. In Stockland was a man named Logan Breem, who had discovered too much about the operations of the horse-room split in Bell City.

Mr. Breem had a date with the Grand Jury. And Mr. McGoran, at his usual substantial fee, was going to make certain that Mr. Breem did not keep the appointment. He wore a neat dark suit, not expensive. That morning he had applied for and acquired a temporary position selling a new type of can opener from door to door. The sample case was beside him.

He would start at the head of Mr. Breem's street. Amateurs cruised around in black sedans cradling tommy-guns. Mr. McGoran was an expert. Experts planned carefully. Experts traveled on city buses and exuded an air of stability, of propriety. He would return one night and, on the basis of the information he had gained, Mr. Breem would abruptly cease to exist.

He studied the back of the neck of the slim girl who sat ahead of him. He was glad that he was sufficiently established in his profession so that he no longer had to accept assignments involving young women. That last young woman, nearly six years ago, had made him quite ill.

The dark hair of the girl in the seat ahead of him was drawn into a tight spinster bun on the back of her neck. Walk up behind her, not so fast as to alarm her. Left hand over her mouth, quick icepick thrust just below the bun of dark hair. No fuss. No noise.

AS though conscious of his gaze the girl raised a slim white hand and patted the dark hair, a gesture infinitely feminine. Jennilou Caswell was extremely bored. The Civil Service regulations were unfair. She had been more than happy to do the extra work. But overtime had to be taken off the following week and Mr. Fincher had practically ordered her to leave the office.

Mr. Fincher acted so odd sometimes. The way he looked at her. He should

know that he could never find anywhere as efficient a secretary as Jennilou Caswell. For her the words marched from the typewriter, crisp and black, with gunfire rattle. She could transcribe as fast as the man could talk.

She dressed in neat black, used the tiniest bit of makeup, kept her voice low. When she walked she set her feet down crisply and with purpose. Purpose and plan. That was what counted in life. Work to do. Work to be proud of doing well. Orderly files. Orderly checkbook. A neat little apartment, as shining as a new needle.

Jennilou Caswell slept flat on her back because she had read that it rested a person more. She scrubbed her teeth with up and down strokes, chewed each mouthful thirty times, wore plain and sensible underclothes. All men were ridiculous, except Mr. Fincher, of course. She read instructive books, went to educational films, subscribed to lofty magazines and bathed twice a day.

She felt most assured in her dark office suit with the white collar. She felt most ill at ease when, in her apartment, off guard, she noticed the somehow blatant and vulgar femininity of her body. Though she carried but a hundred and ten pounds on her five-foot-six Finch frame she wore the tightest girdles she could squeeze into.

She gave a sideways glance of annoyance at the boy who sat on the right-angle bench near the coin box and stared fixedly at her legs. Her skirt was pulled down as far as it would go. Why didn't the dirty little creature go back and stare at that blowzy blonde? She'd probably appreciate it.

But Benny Farr had no idea of where he was staring. He was thinking of the ten-dollar bill in his watch pocket and he had a secret sense of excitement. He was fourteen. He had a thin sallow face, an adenoidal sag of lower lip and grubby hands. His grey pants were too small for him and the dark blue sweatshirt was too big.

Benjamin Farr was deeply concerned over a matter of ethics. On the previous night he and Louie Mastinson had brok-

en into one of the big houses on the hill. The people had been away. A noise had scared them after they'd finished testing Louie's new hunting knife on the upholstery and all they'd gotten away with was a gold watch that Benny had found in a bureau drawer.

The pawn man had given him ten bucks for it—and he was wondering if he could get away with telling Louie that he had only got five. That would mean seven fifty for him, but that brought up the problem of changing the bill. He should have changed it in Bell City or asked the pawn man to give him the money in two fives.

The bus rolled stolidly on. When Stan Weaver stopped for a light the six heads of the passengers all nodded as though they were simultaneously agreeing, without enthusiasm, to some eternal truth. McGoran's distinguished grey head, Shirley Sanger's blond one, the dark head of Jennilou Caswell, the aching rumpled head of Bill Dorvan, the Queen Mary hat of Mrs. Thompson, the scurfy mud-colored head of Benny Farr.

At the end of High Street the bus rolled left under the underpass, straightened out again on Lowell Boulevard. Six heads, nodding without expression. Six bodies, lax in the seats. Tangled thoughts of Jeremy, icepicks, boiler-makers, dictation, brandy and a ten-dollar bill.

Off to the left, beyond the city dump, was the garbage disposal plant and beyond it the windowed roofs of Consolidated Metallurgical winked in the sun. The dark greasy river was off to the right and lining the highway were battered stucco drive-ins, waiting for night to blossom into a fantasy of neon which could not mask the smell of stale deep fat.

On the riverbank, with the beginning of the residential section of Stockland in the distance, there appeared the long white buildings of Loma Transmission Devices, a new concern. A high wire fence surrounded it. On the roof of the central building glittered vast cup-shaped objects of shining metal, looking faintly like half-finished searchlights.

Stockland Mountain was seven miles beyond Stockland. On the top of the mountain were other devices connected with Loma Transmission Devices Research Program Ten.

The cup-shaped objects on the roof of the plant were aimed at the mountain top.

Under the stimulus of a government grant the physicists of Loma had at last made a crude but practical heat engine which could draw off and utilize a shade more than forty percent of the output of the pile buried deep in the bowels of the concrete maze under the plant property. With the heat engine hooked up to the humming generators Loma had a concentrated power source that had top executives walking around on their heels, with glazed eyes and a look of poorly-concealed glee.

Program Ten was the attempt to transmit, over a short range through the air, an intense beam of electric energy without too appreciable a loss in transit.

The plant was in direct contact with the technicians on the peak of Stockland Mountain.

At the predesignated moment the full surge of power was cut over to the cup-shaped transmitter, a full thirty feet in diameter. The attendant on the roof heard the sputter of a short circuit and raced for the cutoff switch. Power was radiating from the transmitter but the short circuit super-heated one of the stanchions supporting the transmitter. It sagged with majestic slowness, turning on the weakened brace until it was aimed directly at the highway in the distance.

The attendant slapped the cutoff switch and the buzzing faded. He cursed softly and reached for the phone. He glanced toward the highway to see if the beam of force had caused damage. A few cars glittered in the distance. At the spot where the beam had pointed a blue and silver interurban bus waddled along like a tired beetle going home from a fancy-dress party.

"Yeah," the attendant said into the phone. "I caught it in time."

CHAPTER II

The Invulnerable

IT was a tingle at the back of the neck, an answering tingle at the base of the spine. It was a feeling like the flutter of warm anticipation. It was a sudden heightening of all senses, an air of well-being, of supreme optimism. It faded but the sense of well-being seemed to cling.

Stan Weaver's toothache faded and the meal no longer rested heavily on his stomach. The sunshine looked good. He whistled through his teeth and clutched the wheel a bit tighter. It felt surprisingly soft. He looked down and saw the plastic of the wheel oozing between his fingers. Cold sweat popped out on him.

Gingerly he edged over to the shoulder and applied the brake. He put his big foot on the brake pedal and pushed slowly down. He pushed the pedal right down through a torn hole in the metal floor and the bus jerked to a stop.

"Why are you stopping here?" the old lady demanded.

Stan Weaver was breathing hard. He made his voice casual and said, "Something wrong with the bus, folks. I'll flag the next one along."

It had happened to him before but before it had been trouble he could understand. He tried to smile at the bored faces of the six passengers. It wasn't much of a smile. He grabbed the metal bar and slung the door open. The thick metal pipe bent and tore off in his hand. He stared stupidly at it and dropped it. It hit with the proper clang of metal, instead of the soft thud he had half expected.

Shirley Sanger sighed. She reached up, grasped the brim of her felt hat to pull it more firmly into place. The felt tore like wet blotting paper and she stared blankly at the two scraps of felt between her fingers. She took the ruined hat off, pulled at it curiously. It tore without her exerting any more than the smallest effort.

Jennilou Caswell was suddenly conscious of the heat now that the motion of the bus had stopped. She knew it would be forty minutes before the next bus. Might as well wait inside the bus. She was annoyed. She grasped the metal handles of the window and gave a quick upward tug. The handles bent like the softest lead, broke in her hands. She gasped.

Ad McGoran decided to wait outside on the shoulder of the road. He picked up the sample case. The leather handle felt soft and spongy in his hand. He grasped the back of the seat ahead of him to pull himself up. His hand bit a large piece out of the back of the seat. At the tearing sound Jennilou looked around, her eyes bulging.

She said, "Why did you—"

"Girlie, they aren't making good buses any more."

He stalked down the aisle, stepped down onto the shoulder. There was a spot on the sleeve of his dark suit. He scrubbed at it with a blunt thumbnail and scrubbed right through the sleeve, so that his white shirt showed through. He decided that the spot was some sort of acid and began to wonder when it had happened.

Mrs. Thompson shifted the bag of groceries to a new position. The paper ripped and the groceries cascaded to the floor. She sniffed with annoyance and bent over to pick them up. The first thing she grasped was a tin of string beans.

She dropped it, took her handkerchief out of her purse and began to wipe her fingers. To all and sundry she said, "You'd think they'd know better than to use defective cans for things people are going to eat. My fingers poked right through that tin and into the beans. I'm certainly going to go back and give that place a piece of my mind." She looked down. The handkerchief, of good Irish linen, had disintegrated like so much tissue.

Bill Dorvan decided to cross the road and catch the next bus back to Bell City. As he went to go around the back end of the bus the driver said, "Hssst!

Hey, you. What you make a this?"

Bill went over. The driver poked a blunt finger against the side of the bus. He pressed hard. There was a sound like a cork being pulled from a bottle and the man's finger went through the metal.

"Crystallization?" Bill suggested weakly.

"Nuts, brother! This bus is melting. Try it yourself."

Bill did with the same result. He forgot the dull ache behind his eyes. "What do you know!" he breathed.

"I'm walkin'," Benny Farr said to nobody in particular and headed up the road toward Stockland, turning to thumb the cars that whistled by.

WHEN he got a safe distance away from the bus he pulled the folded ten out of his watch pocket, annoyed when he heard the pocket rip. He unfolded the bill and stretched it out. It was fun to pop new bills.

He popped it and stared stupidly at the half bill in each hand. His voice cracked as he used words off fences. Have to tape it together. He folded the two halves together and creased them with his finger and thumbnail. And he suddenly had four pieces instead of two. He made a sound suspiciously like a sob.

With the window catch broken Jennilou got very warm. She stood up. The men had all left the bus. Her dress was stuck to her back. She gave a little shake, grasped the lower edge of the tight girdle between thumbs and fingers and pulled it down.

In each hand appeared a little torn wad of fabric, the size of an apple, consisting of fabric from the black suit and rubberized fabric from the girdle. She sat down suddenly, her cheeks and throat hot, and put one palm flat against each thigh to cover the holes through which peeped the reluctant flesh. She could think of no possible way to get off the bus. She wished she could faint dead away.

Mrs. Thompson, busily inspecting her purchases, had found, to her intense dismay that every tin was distressingly fragile, that the bread had the same con-

sistency as that spun sugar sold at carnivals, that it was impossible to pick up one of the eggs.

Handling the brown paper, which tore like tissue, with great care she managed, after three false attempts, to wrap a sample of each purchase and tie it with the string from the eggs. It was hard to tie a knot in string that had all the strength of wet spaghetti.

She walked firmly down the aisle, stepped down and called back to Stan Weaver, "Young man! I am returning to the city to return unsatisfactory merchandise."

"Goodbye, lady," Stan said wearily.

Mrs. Thompson walked around the front of the bus and directly into the path of a panel delivery truck with a drycleaner's sign painted on the side of it. The truck tires screamed and the Queen Mary hat sailed in the air and there was a heavy, metallic sickening thud. Mrs. Thompson described an arc and landed on the shoulder a good thirty feet in front of the bus.

Dorvan gagged and the bus driver closed his eyes and leaned against the bus. Benny Farr was a tiny dot in the distance. McGoran looked on with clinical interest. Jennilou forgot to cover the holes with her palms. Shirley Sanger closed her eyes and bit her lip.

After hitting Mrs. Thompson the truck had darted crazily across the road. It rested half in the ditch on the far side. The driver, wearing a crisp white uniform, climbed slowly out.

Mrs. Thompson stood up and brushed feebly at her ragged clothes. She turned toward the truck and in a clear voice said, "Young man, you should watch where you're going."

"Ain't you dead, lady?" he asked.

Other cars stopped. Water ran out of the smashed radiator of the truck. The back end protruded out onto the highway. The front bumper was a neat, deep U, the headlights staring crosseyed at each other.

Mrs. Thompson retrieved her hat and clamped it over her iron-grey hair. Mr. McGoran retrieved her purse and handed it to her.

"There is at least one gentleman here," she said.

"You better go to a hospital and get checked over," Stan Weaver suggested.

"Nonsense. It shook me up a little. But I'm all right now."

"How about my truck?" the driver asked plaintively.

"And how about my groceries?" asked Mrs. Thompson, seeing an immediate opportunity for profit. She measured the distance from where the truck had hit her to where she had struck the shoulder. She placed both hands over her heart and sank gently to the ground.

"I'm dying," she said. She closed her eyes and thought of brandy—a quart instead of a pint.

SHIRLEY SANGER leaned against the side of the bus. She said to Bill Dorvan, "This is beginning to get me down. Have a cigarette. Handle them gently. There's something wrong with them. They squash. Everything in the world has gone—mealy. And that old lady—foooof."

She took her lighter out of her purse, gave an energetic twist of the wheel. Spring, wheel and lid jumped off the lighter and fell in the dust. She gave him a grey-lipped look. "See what I mean?"

Sirens sounded in the distance. A small man with a notebook came by, saying, "Are you two people witnesses to that tragic accident? Criminal carelessness on the part of the truck driver. I'm an attorney for Mrs. Thompson. Now if you'd—"

"Go away," Bill Dorvan said distinctly. "Come on," he said to Shirley.

As Shirley Sanger started to walk off beside Bill the attorney grabbed her arm and tried to spin her around. Shirley angrily took his wrist to pull his hand off her arm. The little man turned dead white and screamed. He slumped and she released him. He sat on the ground and stared at his wrist. His hand was swelling and darkening and his wrist had a white pinched look. The marks of her fingers were deep and an angry red.

"What did you do to him?" Bill asked. "What is it? Judo?"

She took his wrist. "Just this."

He shrugged. "I don't feel anything special. You are a big strong girl, though."

"Shut up, please."

The ambulance with Mrs. Thompson therein wailed off toward Bell City. Three tow trucks competed for the truck job. The new bus arrived. Shirley, Bill and Mr. McGoran stared frankly at the odd stance and posture of Jennilou. Jennilou's face was flame. She scuttled up into the waiting bus. The driver came back and said, "The crate quit on you, Stan?"

"No. I just got tired of driving it."

"Now I'll laugh. What's wrong?"

"It's melting. Look." Stan did the finger trick.

The other driver licked his lips and tried. He pushed and pushed. Nothing happened except that his knuckle cracked.

"Do that again."

Stan shrugged and did it again. Once again the other driver tried. Bill, watching them, began to have an impossible and incredible hunch. He found a fifty cent piece in his pocket. He pressed his thumb firmly into the middle of it and turned it into a soup bowl for a set of toy silver dishes. He shuddered and put it back in his pocket. He caught Shirley just as she was about to board the bus.

"Get off," he said firmly.

"Look, are you . . ."

"Please, whatever your name is. It's important."

She got off. "The name is Shirley Sanger."

"Bill Dorvan. Look. Can you bend this back?" He handed her the coin. She bent it back.

He took it over to the new driver. "Bud, can you bend this coin?"

"I got no time for jokes, Mister."

Stan Weaver took the coin, held it on edge between thumb and finger and bent it double. He gave Bill Dorvan an odd look. He handed it to the new driver. The man couldn't pry it apart.

Dorvan turned quickly to Shirley and

said, "Come on. We walk for awhile."

She fell in stride beside him without protest.

CHAPTER III

Eating Cobwebs

THE interne looked at Mrs. Thompson with a skeptic's eye. Her wrist was amazingly hard for the wrist of an old woman. The pulse felt strong and normal.

"Shock, maybe," he said. "Plasma, just in case."

The bottle was rigged. He bared the old arm, took the needle and slid it expertly against the blue vein in the bend of the elbow. The needle slipped off. He grunted and tried again. Once again it slipped. He examined the point. It looked all right. He tried to get it in at right angles.

He pressed down. He could see a tiny indentation in the skin. No more. The needle suddenly bent back on itself. The skin blunted the edge of the scalpel he tried next. He began to perspire. He tried the other arm. Only then did he call the resident.

In half an hour both men were perspiring freely. They went over to the far corner of the emergency ward.

The resident said, "Entirely new to me. Obscure disease of some sort. I can't even scratch her!"

Mrs. Thompson sat up. "Stop mumbling."

The two men gave her nervous smiles. "Everything is fine, Mrs. Thomas."

"Thompson."

The interne whispered, "Let's put her under and get a diamond drill."

The resident flinched, thought it over, said, "Get hold of the anaesthetist and have her wheeled upstairs."

* * * * *

Benny Farr didn't see the cop until he got up on his front porch. By then it was too late to make a run for it.

"You Benjamin Farr?"

Inside the house he could hear the sound of his mother weeping. Always looking for an excuse to turn on the flood. "What if I am?"

"We got a friend of yours down at the station. He's been giving us quite a story."

"Louie!" Benny gasped.

"Right, lad. Now come along quiet."

He grabbed Benny's wrist. Benny twisted away and released himself with surprising ease. "Getcha hands offa me!"

The cop lunged and grabbed him by the shoulders. Benny caught a thick wrist in his two skinny hands and twisted it. The cop yelled and fell heavily. He came up fast, his arm hanging oddly twisted. Benny turned and ran.

He heard his mother scream and there was a terrific blow between his shoulder blades. Synchronous with the blow was the sound of a shot. He fell, rolled, got to his feet and continued running. Another shot and a whirr by his ear. Benny kept running, rounding the corner, cutting over behind the Reilly house and across the new lots.

* * * * *

McGoran sold three can openers on the street before he arrived at the Broom house. His suave tone masked a dozen petty annoyances. The handle had come off the sample case and the latch had somehow become badly bent. He had broken two doorbells without meaning to. He had to hold the case under his arm.

Halfway up the sidewalk of the Broom house he heard the scream of tires. He whirled, slapping at his armpit.

"Don't touch it, McGoran," a cold voice said. "We've been expecting you any day."

"My name isn't McGoran."

"Fingerprints will prove that. Walk slowly toward the car. Lock your fingers at the nape of your neck. That's right."

There were three men in dark suits in the car. They watched him approach with heavy amusement.

There were two in the front seat, one in the back. The one in the back opened

the car door. McGoran grabbed the man's wrist and pulled him out of the car, dodging around behind it and pulling his own gun. It was an automatic and to make certain there was a shell in the chamber he yanked hard on the slide. The slide pulled off in his hand.

He turned to run, knowing he was too late. The burst of shots, striking his back, staggered him. He turned to lift his hands, forgetting that he still held the broken automatic in his hands. The man fifteen feet away pumped four slow shots into McGoran's chest. He stood, waiting for the black mist of death, waiting for the ground to come up and hit him.

As he moved a slug shifted down, rolled down inside his pant leg and across the pavement. The three men stared at him. McGoran turned and ran again. Two sharp blows against the back of his head half dazed him but he kept running.

* * * * *

Jennilou Caswell collapsed onto her bed. It was so wonderful to be alone in the apartment at last. Later she would get the superintendent to replace the key which had twisted off in the lock as she had opened the door.

She ruefully examined the ruined dress. It tore as she lifted it over her head. The girdle ripped as she peeled it off. She frowned. Probably, without knowing it, she had walked through an acid mist of some sort. She remembered reading about some city where chemical dust in the air had ruined nylons.

She took a shower, tore one of her favorite towels afterward. Slowly she was learning to handle things more delicately. But no matter how hard she tried she could not get back into another girdle. She weighed herself, found that her weight was exactly the same as before.

When she tried to comb her hair the teeth shredded out of the comb. She gave up, tried to file her nails. Her nails wore the burr off the file. She tried nail scissors and the blades bent like wax.

Close to hysteria she opened her own typewriter. Typing exercises always

soothed her. Feeling better, she rattled off the first line, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy red dog." Machine-gun speed. At the end of the line her hand flicked up and slammed the carriage return back for the next line. The carriage slammed completely out of the end of the typewriter carrying the paper with it, and crashed on the floor beside her desk.

Jennilou Caswell buried her face in her hands and began to weep as though her heart was broken.

* * * * *

"Are you convinced?" Bill Dorvan asked the tall blond girl.

She had gnawed her lipstick off her lower lip. Her eyes had a glazed look. "Little man, I am more than convinced."

"Something happened in that bus. I had a tingling feeling. Did you?"

"Now that you mention it."

"We don't feel any different. It's like you said—as though everything had become mealy. But it hasn't. We're different, you and I—and of course the others on that bus. I'll never forget your face after you took a poke at that telephone pole."

"You told me to, smartie."

"Just like somebody had hit it with the blunt end of a steel baseball bat. You punched a hole six inches deep."

She shuddered. "Don't talk about it."

"It isn't what you'd call a feminine characteristic, babe. You could take on Ray Robinson and Gorgeous George at the same time."

"You cease to amuse."

"I made up my mind not to talk to any more women."

"How lucky for them!"

"But we've got something in common and somehow I don't want to be alone with this nasty little knack we've developed. Do you?"

"I—I guess not."

"Let's go back to town. I'll buy you a meal near a place where I can get a shave. Then I'll look a little more respectable."

She gave him a sudden grin which wrinkled her nose. "Okay, iron man."

An hour later the barber lathered Bill Dorvan's face, took a glance at the clock. Five minutes to go.

He stropped the razor, made a long stroke from temple to chin. The razor rasped across the beard with none of the usual sleek sound. It lifted the lather off and left the beard. The barber grunted and got another razor. Same thing. He examined the edges of the blades. The notches were visible to the naked eye.

With a wet towel he mopped off the lather. He tilted the chair back to normal position. He said, "Mister, you take that beard to somebody else. Already two razors ruined. Please go away. No charge."

Bill stood up. Before the barber could protest, he picked up a pair of shears. Looking in a mirror he grasped a thick lock of hair, tried to cut it with the shears. It bent the center rivet and sprung the blades. He threw the shears aside and stalked out of the shop, wondering how he'd look in a full beard.

* * * * *

McGoran hid until night, then made his way into the city. He could not tear his mind from what he had seen when he had pulled his shirt open to examine his wounds. There were four round bruises on his chest, the skin faintly broken over two of them. Other things had begun to add up. In the patch of woods where he hid he had found a rusty horseshoe. It had been simple to twist it until the metal snapped.

His clothes were a giveaway. In the city he found a man his size. He followed him. On a dark street he caught up with him. He had meant to take the man very gently by the throat. But the throat pulped under his fingers and the man was dead before McGoran dragged him away. It was difficult to undress the body but he managed it. He left the man naked in the small court behind the dark office building, stuffed his own clothes into a wastepaper bin three blocks away.

He then walked boldly into a good restaurant and ordered dinner. It wasn't until he took his first bite of steak that

some of the more horrid aspects of this odd change became more evident. The steak dissolved like gelatin. The flavor was right but he could part it with his lips. The texture was sickeningly bland. He could barely detect the substance of the bread. It was akin to eating cobwebs.

CHAPTER IV

Hell to Pay

TOM BELLBIGHT was a physically lazy man, lank, languid. A pipe smoker, a congenital bachelor, a hanger of legs over chair arms, a fight fan, a doctor of physics, research chief of Program Ten for Loma.

He came shuffling into Dickinson's office with a sheaf of newspapers in his hand. Dickinson looked up impatiently. "Well?"

Tom Bellbight knocked the ashes out of his pipe and shoved it into his pocket. He collapsed into a chair like a scarecrow blown over by the wind. "Now beat on your chest like a partridge, Dick. You can spare a couple of minutes."

Dickinson sighed. "Okay. What goes?"

"Accident yesterday. Old lady hit by a truck."

"That's hardly earthshaking, Tom."

"This old lady walked out in front of a bus. Truck hit her. Did two hundred and eighty-six dollars damage to the front end of the truck. Knocked the old lady thirty feet. Didn't even bruise her."

"She sounds like my mother-in-law."

"The bus was stopped because the driver pushed the brake pedal down through the floor. I stopped down and looked at the bus. Take about eleven hundred pounds to push that pedal down that way."

"Are you trying to confuse me?"

"After he did that the bus driver pushed his finger through the side of the bus. About a dozen times."

"Probably the old lady's son—the old lady you were talking about."

"Oh, I checked on her in the hospital.

They had to use a diamond drill to open a vein in her arm."

"This isn't April first, Tom."

"Just keep listening, Dick. Yesterday afternoon a cop shot a kid in the back. The kid kept running. The kid, about fourteen, had broken the cop's arm. Cop weighed two ten. That happened at about the same time plainclothes cops tried to pick up one Addison McGoran. They shot him three times in the back, four times in the chest, twice in the back of the head."

"Thorough job."

"He ran away."

Dickinson flushed. "Listen, Dr. Bellbight, if you think that I'm going to stop what I'm doing and—"

"Keep your balance sheet buttoned, Dick. Man found in Bell City last night. Throat so crushed the coroner was ready to swear he'd been strangled by an ape. Lawyer out at the accident got his wrist broken by a blond gal who just grabbed him. She didn't twist. She grabbed him."

"What are you—"

"A scientist is supposed to correlate interesting little facts. Today the police in Stockland found a lot of busted pay phone and pinball machines. In each case the metal on the coin box looked as though it had been tinfoil grabbed by a small hand, a kid's hand. His fingers punched through the metal and the coins were gone."

"A babe, at midnight last night, Civil Service steno, tried to commit suicide. Jumped out of her apartment window. Eighth story. Half dressed. She hit on the asphalt, got up and went back to her room. I went out this afternoon and took a look at the spot. You can see a clear imprint of the side of her face in the asphalt."

"I am beginning to suspect that this isn't some idiotic joke. But I can't guess what your object is."

"Coming to it. Yesterday evening a guy went into a barbershop just before closing time. Barber tried two razors—couldn't cut a hair. Then the guy took scissors and tried to cut a lock of his own hair. Here's the scissors. I got 'em from the cops. The barber reported him.

The bus driver went home last night and gave his wife a light love tap. Broke her jaw and knocked two teeth out and gave her a concussion. Swears that he only tapped her with his fingertips."

"This seems to be an amazing account of durability."

"Seven people on that bus. The old lady, the driver, the babe who tried to kill herself, the blondie who broke the guy's wrist, the fellow with a beard too tough to cut, the kid who was shot in the back and the guy who stopped nine slugs."

"All on the same bus?"

"As near as I can check."

"For heaven's sake, Tom. So what?"

Tom smiled mildly. "So that bus went by here at exactly two-eighteen yesterday afternoon."

DICKINSON'S face slowly changed.

He said softly, "Two-eighteen." He got up from behind the desk and stood by the window. "But that doesn't—"

"Johnny Hubbard was on the roof. He says that the transmitter sagged and pointed at the highway. The only thing in the line of fire was a blue-and-silver bus."

"But what we're trying to do doesn't mean that—"

"We know very little about what we're trying to do, Dick. I've got my own hunches about it."

"What do you think?"

"In strictly non-technical language, Dick, I think the beam gave those people a sea-change. Take soft wood—pine. Type of molecular activity and surface density not too hard to disturb. Dent it with your thumbnail. Make a change in molecular activity—say freeze it to absolute zero. Have a hard time denting it with a cold chisel and a sledge.

"Or the reverse. Suppose you speed up the electron activity. Each electron a tiny electrical charge zooming around at a great rate. Forty thousand miles a second roughly. Suppose you push that up to a hundred thousand miles a second. My guess is that the pine would react the same as though it had been frozen to absolute zero.

"I have a hunch that the beam had no effect on inanimate substances but that through some freak of luck, or bad luck, it speeded the whirl of electrons in all animate substances within range. So it's not too hard to figure the effects. It would affect function and muscle tone. Enormously powerful people with a structure like the finest tool steel. Teeth like diamonds."

"It doesn't make sense."

Bellbight smiled. "Then Dick, old man, you think up an answer for indestructible old ladies, men who can shove a finger through sheet steel and a man you can shoot in the back of the head without stopping him."

Dickinson turned from the window, his face worried. "I'll have to contact the lawyers. There'll be damage suits from this. There'll be hell to pay—if you're right. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go see the little girl who jumped out the window. And then I'm going down to the jail in Bell City and see the bus driver. When his wife came out of the fog she signed a complaint."

* * * * *

The third time he knocked on the door, more impatiently than before he heard her say, "Go away!" There was a tiny metallic quality to her voice, the half-echo of the sound a musical saw might make.

He called to her. "I'm not a reporter, Miss Caswell."

Her voice was closer to the other side of the door. "Who are you?"

"You need me, Miss Caswell."

Her laugh was metal hysteria. "Oh, a psychiatrist."

"No, a physicist."

After a long silence the door opened abruptly. The hair was no longer in a neat dark bun. It flowed in wild disorder, giving her a fey look. She wore blue jeans and a heavy flannel shirt.

"I can wear these clothes," she said, "if I'm very careful."

He walked across the room and sat down, stared curiously at a fireplace poker that had been tied neatly into a lover's knot.

In a flat unemotional clinical tone he told her in layman's language what he thought was wrong with her. He didn't tell her how or why it had happened.

She sat opposite him.

"Why did you try to kill yourself, Miss Caswell?" he asked gently.

She ran a shaking hand through her hair. "Everything was—orderly. I wanted a normal life more than anything. I had everything planned. And then this. I can't go to work. Everything I touch—"

"That's because all of this is new to you. Suppose you took a child and put him to work juggling glassware. Impossible at first, yes. But slowly he would learn the requisite manual dexterity. He would form a sensory, nervous and muscular adjustment to the task."

"But I can't even comb my hair. Food has no substance to it."

"We can have a comb made of tool steel. The problem is akin to combing hard wire. It is possible to buy tough cuts of meat and overbroil them. I think I can understand how you feel. You touch your own arm. It feels the way it always did. It seems to you as though everything in the world has turned fragile. There is no solid substance to anything. Right?"

She nodded. He was pleased to see that his calm tone had quieted her.

"What do you want of me?"

"I want to help you. In return, I want something on which to make laboratory tests. Bite off a fragment of fingernail and pull a few hairs from your head. Also I want to see how your skin feels to the touch."

The hairs were like steel wire. The halfmoon of fingernail felt like a chip from the cutting edge of a machine tool.

Quite suddenly she began to weep. He put his hands on her shoulders. Gently at first, then exerting all his strength, he tried to dig his fingers into her. Her head was bent. She lifted her face and looked at him from streaming eyes. He saw the tiny scratches at the base of her throat.

"How did that happen?"

"I tried—a knife. It bent."

On impulse he kissed her lightly. Her lips were warm and tasted of salt but they were formed of a strange marble.

"Everything will be fine," he said.

CHAPTER V

Folk of Iron

STAN WEAVER sat on the cell bunk and said, "I always wondered how it would feel to go nuts."

"Suppose you're not crazy," Bellbight said.

Weaver stood up. "Of course I'm crazy! Look here." He went over to the cell door, grasped the bars, spread them wide and easily bent them back. He said, "I've read enough magazine articles and seen enough movies about people with broken wagons, bud. I just thought I bent those bars."

"Look, Weaver. Something happened to you. You're not crazy. At this moment you're probably the strongest man in the world. Bullets would bounce off you. This is so strange to you that you've jumped on what you think is a reasonable explanation. I've interviewed your wife in the hospital. I assure you that you didn't imagine what happened to her when you gave her that love tap."

Stan Weaver sat down heavily. He said, "I hated driving those crates full of sourpuss people. Now I wish I was on the route again and I wish I couldn't even remember what happened. I wish Madge was okay."

He looked up and gave Tom Bellbight a weak smile. "This time I just tapped her, real light like, across the cheek. If I'd hit where I usually do I'd have busted her back."

"I've been talking to your wife as I said. I explained a few things. She's withdrawing the complaint. You can walk out of here with me."

"Maybe it isn't safe for me to be around. Maybe I'm better off here."

"Now you're beginning to think straight, Mr. Weaver. I've got a car out-

side. The sergeant has the stuff on his desk that he took out of your pockets. Come on along and just remember every minute that you can smash anything you touch too quickly, up to and including the human species."

"Where do we go? I don't want to go home. Madge's sister is looking after the kids. She's got a tongue like a rusty razor."

"No. We'll go to my lab. It's at the Loma plant."

"I know the place. Go by there six times a day."

* * * * *

After using up the whole box of blades, McGoran gave up trying to shave. He was almost devoid of imagination. There was a logical explanation for everything. If a fact could not be explained it could be utilized. There was no capacity for awe in him. In the hotel room he carefully tested his new characteristics, cannily avoiding any destruction that would be overly noticeable.

As the full import struck him he began to make plans that were more inclusive than any he had ever considered before. If it was possible to roll a dime between his fingers into a pellet, then it followed that no barrier of metal would stop him. Thus jails were no longer traps. If bullets had little effect the police were no longer to be feared. Of course an artillery piece would probably do the trick.

Definitely they would be hunting him. The biggest question mark was how much longer this new invulnerability would last. Thus, if the duration were suspect, it would be wise to utilize the benefits of it before it wore off.

He had always possessed a considerable scorn for fellow humans. Now this scorn was intensified. At last his inner suspicion of superiority had been definitely proved. And he realized that he had always suspected that one day it would be proved.

The urge to put it to the test was too strong to withstand. He tiptoed down the corridor of the hotel until he heard

voices behind one of the doors. It was eleven in the morning.

He tried the knob and it twisted off in his hand. He rammed his finger into the keyhole, the metal spread to admit it. He crooked the finger, turning it, feeling the rasp of broken metal inside. The door swung open as he pushed.

The man stood in his underwear by the window. A doughy young girl sat on the edge of the bed pulling on her nylons. The man whirled and said, "Wrong room, brother."

"Right room. Let's see your money."

The man was young and huge. He tensed and said, "A gag?"

"No gag."

With no warning the man rushed him. McGoran tried to dodge the blow but it landed squarely on the blunt point of his chin. There was the tiny crunch of broken bones. The huge young man screamed thinly, bending to hug his broken hand to his belly.

To McGoran the blow felt as though somebody had flicked him with a towel. He chopped down at the young man's head with his clenched fist. The blow drove the young man face down onto the floor, blood welling slowly into the ugly concave fracture of the skull.

McGoran sucked his lip. He hadn't planned on murder. The girl, without a sound, darted for the door. He snatched her wrist as she went by him. He swung her around, feeling the bone give. There was a pressure point at the base of the skull . . . She dropped across the body of the young man with the limp impact of death.

McGoran pocketed the sixteen dollars he found in the man's billfold, plus the seven dollars from the girl's purse. This had not gone properly but there was time to rectify it. He slid the window open, picked them up as though they were rag dolls and slung them through the opening, the girl first.

The excitement gave him the mask of obscurity as he went through the lobby out onto the street and turned away from the crowd that already was blocking traffic.

McGoran walked down the street, feel-

ing larger than life, stronger than a god, invincible and untouchable. He walked with a wide grin on his face, breathing deeply.

* * * * *

There were two tin cups and they drank from them. The cups had to be handled as carefully as though they were made of wet paper.

Bill Dorvan said solemnly, "Announcement to make. Man of iron announces liquor still works. Fact of scientific interest, no doubt."

Shirley Sanger peered at him. "You're a mess, bub. Indians used to pull their beards out. Read it in a book. Can't you do that?"

He grasped one hair by the corner of his mouth and tugged. It came out. "Hurts too much. Always wanted a beard. Now gotta have one."

She looked around. "Nice apartment here. But dirty. Needs a good cleaning."

"Sandra used to keep it clean. That's the toaster right there. Toaster the note leaned on. Famous toaster. Hate it."

"You just feel sorry for yourself. Poor abused male."

"All women no good. Accepted fact."

"You say."

"I say. Know from experience." He frowned at her. "I know you're no good too but I like you. And we got a lot in common." He reached over and patted her shoulder.

"Hands off, iron man. I told you before and I tell you again that whatever it is that has happened to us doesn't give you any invitation to play house. I came back here this morning because I scared the whey out of Jane, my roommate. I had her try to comb my hair."

He said, "Carnival act."

"What?"

"Manifest destiny. You and me. Go do tricks for the people. Bend iron bars. Lots of dough in it."

"I wouldn't team up with a drunk."

"Who's a drunk?"

"You are, William Dorvan. A sloppy self-pitying no-good escapist drunk."

"Then why hang around?"

"I won't." She got up and picked up her purse and headed for the kitchen.

He scrambled after her, breaking the chair in the process. He caught her at the door. He shook his head. "Wait a second while I talk sense. Right now I'm beginning to feel sober. You scared me. Shirley, I was drinking to try to get this thing that's happened to us into better perspective. I wasn't drinking on account of Sandra. All that doesn't seem so important any more."

"Shirley, I like you. I want you around. Suppose that this iron business never wears off. You could never kiss a man without being afraid of crushing his ribs and snapping off his teeth. No man but me. In a world that's suddenly turned crazy we're going to be outcasts. But this is what is important—even without the craziness I'd still want you around."

She gave him a long level look. She sighed. "If I'm careful enough maybe I can whip up some coffee, Dorvan."

* * * * *

Benny Farr lay in the brush, for once unashamed of tears.

He knew that he could not go home. Home had suddenly become an enormously desirable place. He had the idea that if he slept in his own bed he would wake up to find that this new enormous and terrifying strength had gone from him as inexplicably as it had arrived.

His torn pockets jangled with the nickels he had taken from phone booths and pinball machines. But the money wasn't any good. Not with someone watching his house so that he couldn't go back. He knew that he had broken the cop's arm. That would mean reform school if not something worse.

When the tears finally faded away he rolled to where he could sit with his back against the bole of a tree. He picked up a stone and slowly powdered it between his fingers. It gave him a sense of power to be able to do that.

There was a lump in his throat. He couldn't go home. If he stayed close to Stockland they'd get him sooner or later.

A freight train chuffed along in the distance. That had to be the answer. He walked at first, then ran. A new city,

empty houses to break into. He knew he could kill a normal man with his bare hands. Let a brakeman try to throw him off the train. He'd throw the brakeman off piece by piece.

He ran along beside the box car. The freight was moving. He could not run as fast as it was going. He snatched the hand rail. His body slammed against the side of the box car as the hand rail snapped in his fingers. He fell to the roadbed, bounded under the wheels.

There was a tenth of a second of shrill fear, an enormous blow, then a melting velvet darkness.

CHAPTER VI

Angry Voices

HUSKY voices in the summer evening. "Reee all about ut! Iron men. Can't kill 'em! Reece all about ut!"

Saccharine voice of the commentator. "Despite the attempts of the Loma plant executives to hush it up, police have discovered that a defective electric ray of some sort was unleashed by accident on the public five days ago shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon.

"This ray had the effect of giving the six passengers and the bus driver in the vehicle it touched enormous strength and virtual indestructibility. This became evident when, late yesterday afternoon, Benjamin Farr, one of the passengers on the bus, attempted to board a fast freight three miles outside of Stockton.

"He fell under the wheels. The Medical Examiner has stated that at least five sets of wheels passed over the boy. He died of a crushed throat. Though his body, except for the throat, was virtually unmarked, the wreck of the freight train tied up east-west traffic on four sets of tracks for nearly five hours.

"Of the six passengers and the bus driver, the following are now in custody—Stanley H. Weaver, the bus driver. He is being held at Loma for experimental

work with the permission of the authorities. Miss Jennilou Caswell, Civil Service stenographer, under guard at her apartment. Mrs. Harry Thompson, widow, now at the General Hospital.

"Still at large are Addison McGoran, hired killer, and a young man and young woman whose names, up to the moment of this broadcast, are not yet known. Following are the descriptions of McGoran and the other two. If you should see anyone meeting this description, please phone the police immediately. Warning. These three people may be dangerous. McGoran certainly is."

Bill Dorvan gingerly turned the dial, shutting off the radio. He gave Shirley a weak smile. "Now we're news, baby."

"What will we do, Bill?"

"I say, let's go to Loma. Maybe they know what they're doing. I'm sure the cops won't."

* * * * *

Tom Bellbight slouched into Dickinson's office. This time he got immediate attention. "Well?" said Dickinson.

"Hardness tests show no fluctuation. He can stand heat that would blister you or me. Much less susceptible to fatigue. I've rigged up a few special tests. Whatever it is, it isn't fading a bit. We checked the samples and my guess is right. Acceleration of electron orbits. I don't know what to do next."

"If they can only round up those three, the heat will be off us, Tom. The old lady is suing. So's the bus company. That's the only two so far."

The communication box buzzed. Dickinson pushed the switch down, said, "I told you I didn't want to be disturbed. What! Send them right in."

He grinned at Bellbight. "Two of the missing three. A Mr. Dorvan and a Miss Sanger."

"We'll clamp onto them," Bellbight said, "and run them through the same tests I've been giving Weaver."

"Shall we tell the police?"

"I think so. They won't want them. They don't want people who can walk out of their cells like tanks going through a barracks."

"Why haven't you been running the tests on the Caswell girl?"

Tom Bellbight, surprisingly, flushed. "She's a little unraveled at the edges. Tough on her, you know."

"Don't tell me that such a confirmed misogynist—"

"Just call me an amateur psychiatrist, Dick. Jennilou was in one of those graves open at both ends, commonly called a rut. The walking dead. This is shocking her out of it. She might turn out to be a person."

Dickinson assumed an official glare. "Which is more important, Tom? Getting Loma into the clear on this thing or your personal social experiment?"

Bellbight yawned. "A long time ago, Dick, I decided that I was a rebel. The only way I could acquire immunity from people who like to give orders was to acquire specialized knowledge. Ever since then I've done exactly as I please. Take it or leave it. Is that too blunt?"

The girl opened the door and Shirley Sanger and Bill Dorvan came into the office. They walked with care. Dorvan rubbed his stubbed chin apologetically. "Need anything lifted or bent?"

"We can't tell you how much we appreciate your coming here like this and we can't tell you how sorry we are that this happened," Dickinson said.

"In some funny way, maybe it's a good thing," Shirley said, glancing at Bill Dorvan.

"At least," said Bellbight, "life hasn't been dull for you. My name is Bellbight. You two deserve facts. As of the moment, after working with the driver, Mr. Weaver, I can say that there is no diminution of this new aspect. I am at a loss as to what can be done through laboratory means to alter it."

DORVAN swallowed hard. "That seems straight enough. It gives a guy a pretty—lonesome feeling."

"Like we were from Mars or something," Shirley said.

"You are willing to cooperate?" asked Dickinson.

"We're here, aren't we?" Shirley said sharply.

"Fine. You'll report to Tom Bellbight here. You'll be given rooms in the lab workers' annex."

"How about this McGoran guy?" Bill asked.

"No clue as to where he might be so far. But he'll give himself away. You can be sure of that," Dickinson answered.

"Do you remember the dark girl on the bus?" Bellbight asked.

Shirley nodded. "Shy kid. Pretty prim. Scared. Say this must be pretty rugged for her."

"It is. I'd like to have you sort of become a mother hen. She'll be better off around another woman similarly affected. I'll talk her into coming over here."

* * * * *

Ad McGoran sat in the room he had rented in Bell City and grinned as he read the newspapers, heard the speculation over the radio. They were stupid, all of them. That talk about the beard being a giveaway. He stroked his smooth chin. His face was pink and slightly sore. It had meant three hours of work with a hand mirror but he had plucked out every last hair.

And all that stuff about giving himself away. Nonsense! All he had to do was keep his head. No sudden movements. Touch everything gently. Don't let anyone brush against his rock-hard body in a crowd.

He left the room to eat and buy newspapers. And his mind was busy. There were so many possibilities. Single-handed he could take over an armored bank car or break through the wall of any building. But that made money too easy. There should be something bigger and better.

Power was the answer. There was a purpose behind all this. If he went after the dough they'd get to work on him. Big guns and gas and possibly electric shock. No, the thing was evident. Take over from the inside. Fix it so that his superiority would be recognized.

But that couldn't be done alone. He thought back over the people in the bus. The driver was good material. And that

guy with the hangover. He looked sore at the world. The big blonde would join him too. Not the timid little black-haired one who had sat in front of him. Four of them could do it. Take over—declare that a new type of human was going to be boss from now on—threaten political assassinations—carry out a few to put the fear of God in the others.

The kid was dead and the old lady was too bossy. It had to be the driver and the one with the hangover and the blonde. The paper said that all three were at Loma. And so the idea was to get to them during the night. A little conference—it wouldn't take long, to make them understand.

The four of them—that was the picture. Ad McGoran would be the boss—the big boss. And the blonde was nice. Sanger—that was her name. He could take over and the other two would follow orders and the blonde would be beside him. No petty thefts. No bank jobs. Start right at the top.

* * * * *

Mrs. Thompson caught the lip of the beer can between the fingernails of her thumb and first finger and stripped it off delicately. She drained the can and frowned. Didn't seem to be any body to the beer any more. More like a gas than a liquid. Hardly able to feel it on her tongue.

When the beer was finished she crumpled the can like a paper cup and threw it in the general direction of the white enamel wastebasket in her hospital room.

The nurse came in, only half able to conceal her distaste. She said distantly, "You have visitors, Mrs. Thompson."

"Young woman," Mrs. Thompson said with metallic distinctness, "You have been told that I have no interest in answering the questions of rattle-headed newspaper people and that I have no time for cranks who—"

"These men have police permission, Mrs. Thompson. I think you should see them."

Mrs. Thompson sighed. "Don't let 'em stay long, honey."

Three men filed in. They were prosperous looking, a bit flashily dressed. They wore confident smiles.

The tallest one bowed. "Mrs. Thompson? I am Arthur Ledbetter. This is my partner, John Hungerford. Ledbetter and Hungerford, theatrical agents. And this other gentleman is Wilton Hisk, our attorney."

"Pleased, I'm sure," said Mrs. Thompson, visibly impressed.

MR. HISK wore glasses. He cleared his throat in passable imitation of a toy trumpet. "Mrs. Thompson, many, many obstacles were strewn in our path by those who would seek to isolate you from the world, calling your condition unfortunate.

"However, on your behalf I have forced the authorities to admit that there are no charges against you, that you are a free agent and that your liberty would not constitute a menace to this or any other community."

"I'm sprung?" asked Mrs. Thompson.

"Ah—precisely. You may leave at any time."

"But I'm a sick woman. Horrible accident. Damages, you know."

"And how much do you expect to get?" Mr. Hisk asked softly.

Mrs. Thompson bit her lip. "Maybe as much as five thousand."

Mr. Hisk bowed low to Mr. Ledbetter and said, "I think you should tell her."

Mr. Ledbetter unstrapped his briefcase with the air of the court jeweler bringing emeralds to the queen. He took out stiff and official-looking contracts and laid them reverently by Mrs. Thompson's elbow.

"What are these?"

"This top one is a contract with the Hawley Chain of Theaters. All you have to perform are a few small feats of strength. Sixteen weeks. When the curtain goes up you are sitting in a rocking chair. Same pose as Whistler's Mother. You smile at the audience, pick up a horseshoe—"

"How much?"

"Ah—two thousand a week for sixteen weeks."

Mrs. Thompson swallowed hard. "I—I . . ."

"And this contract is with Trans-East Video. Six months. One halfhour show a week. Total value of this one is twenty-six thousand, less of course our usual fifteen percent. This contract is for two weeks in the Garden with the Lombard Kirby International Circus. Five thousand a week."

Mrs. Thompson said weakly, "A woman of my position and standing in the community. It isn't dignified. I . . ." Her voice faltered and she licked her lips.

Mr. Hungerford spoke for the first time. "I assure you that each act will be staged with enormous dignity, Mrs. Thompson. And, as a small advance in consideration of your signature . . ." He took out a fat wallet, counted out four crisp five hundred dollar bills. He bowed as he handed her the pen.

Mrs. Thompson put her tongue in the corner of her mouth and signed. She giggled nervously. She looked at the pen and said, "This is one of those pens that writes under brandy, isn't it? How absurd of me! I meant to say under water."

The three dignified gentlemen joined in her nervous laughter.

* * * * *

The fenced enclosure of the Loma plant was lit by floodlights. But one corner was darker than the others. McGoran, crouching low, ran from one clump of shadow to the next. He paused and watched the fence, the area beyond.

At last he reached the fence itself. He thrust a hooked finger through the wire, ripped down. The thin steel parted with a faint singing sound.

In seconds he was across the open space and crouched at the base of the wall of the laboratory wing, his breathing unlabored, his face calm and confident.

The footsteps of the guard came close. As the guard rounded the corner McGoran jumped, bearing him to the ground. A steel-hard hand clamped across the man's mouth before he could cry out.

McGoran leaned close, his lips almost

touching the man's ear. "I'm McGoran. Don't struggle. Where are the others? The ones like me. The bus driver and Dorvan and the blonde."

He cautiously released the pressure. "Go to—!" the guard grunted.

McGoran smiled without mirth and found the man's hand. He slowly clamped down on it, stifling the scream of pain, feeling the bones give with the faint sound of a wooden matchbox slowly crumpled.

"Do you tell me or do I fix the other hand?"

"Next—building to the—left. Far end of it. Second floor."

McGoran almost tenderly shifted the heel of his hand until it was under the guard's chin. He pushed up. The guard lay with his dead eyes open, staring at the slow shift of the countless stars, the night breeze brushing his distorted face. McGoran took the man's flashlight and hat.

Ten minutes later he crouched by Dorvan's bed and shook Dorvan awake. Bill sat up, saying, "What goes on?"

"Shut up and listen."

"Who're you?"

"McGoran. You make a sound before I finish and I'll kill you. Don't think I can't. I've got a proposition for you, Dorvan."

"You're crazy to come here, McGoran."

"I can use you, Dorvan, and you can use me."

* * * * *

Two hundred yards away Tom Bellbight stood on the flat roof of the central transmission station. He leaned against the guard mesh of one of the huge cup-shaped transmitters. The starlight was bright, only slightly dimmed by the floodlights four stories below.

He tamped the tobacco down into his pipe with his thumb as he glanced at Jennilou Caswell who sat on the low concrete wall that bordered the roof. As he lit the pipe the puffing flames gleaming on the flat planes of his face, he kept watching her. The silhouette of brow and nose against the far panel of stars was very lovely indeed.

She said, "I forgot to thank you for the comb."

"Friend of mine in a machine shop. Made it out of moly steel. Works, eh?"

She turned toward him and smiled. "Hadn't you noticed?"

"Thought you were looking kempt. Is that a word?"

"We'll call it a word. Tom, I don't know what has happened to me."

"I tried to tell you."

"No, I mean on the inside. The whole world seems to have opened up just—well, just at the same time so many doors have been slammed in my face."

He chuckled. "Fine metaphors, Jennilou."

He saw the new rigidity of her shoulders. She turned and held her hands out to him. Her voice was husky. "Tom, if it wasn't impossible for us I couldn't say this. I'd be too shy to say it. But now it is like we're on opposite sides of a glass wall. Look but don't touch."

"That's the most important door that's closed. You wouldn't have liked me before, Tom. I don't like what I was. But now—now I'm alive and there isn't anything for us, is there?"

"There's this," he said, indicating with a sweep of his hand the night and the stars.

"But it isn't enough. I love you, Tom."

"That's a word with no adequate scientific definition. It has clinical and physiological symptoms. I hate to use loose words. But there isn't any other. I love you too, Jennilou."

Her laugh was too shrill. "But you can't kiss me. To me you're a creature made of tissue and slender sticks. Oh, Tom!"

He went to her and put his hands on the warm rigid marble of her shoulders.

* * * * *

The two men from New Mexico were silent as Dickinson drove his car toward the Loma plant.

"You sure Bellbight will be there?" the one called Sherman asked.

"He'll be there."

Another mile passed in silence. The other man, Lamont, leaned close to the

windows and looked up at the stars. He laughed softly. "Think about it long enough and it'll scare you to death."

Dickinson said, "I know what you mean. I know just what you mean."

* * * * *

"What's your answer?" McGoran asked.

Dorvan gingerly lifted the cigarette to his lips. He shrugged. "Sounds fine to me. You've got it all figured out."

"How about Weaver?"

"He'll go along too."

"Then let's get out of here. You get the blonde indoctrinated while I talk to Weaver. He's across the hall, you said."

"Right across the hall."

"No tricks, now."

"Look, McGoran. I didn't ask to be turned into a freak. So I'll make everything out of it that I can."

"Good boy!" McGoran said. "Don't waste time."

* * * * *

The P.A. system crackled and Tom recognized Dickinson's voice. "Report to my office, Tom. Immediately. Important."

"What's that about?" Jennilou asked.

He shrugged. "You ready to turn in?"

He led her toward the trap door that opened onto the staircase. Out of habit he took her arm to help her so that she wouldn't fall. But she could fall without damage. It made him slightly ill to think of it.

They parted under the floodlights and he turned toward the main offices. Jennilou walked slowly toward the wing where they all slept. She walked with her head down.

She walked up the stairs to the second floor and stopped as she heard the low voices, angry voices.

"You're nuts! Get out of here," Weaver said loudly.

"Keep your voice down or I'll shut you up for good." Jennilou frowned. She didn't recognize the second voice. It had a dangerous sound to it.

She moved softly to where she could see. Dark figures in the dim hall. A stranger—no, not a stranger. The man

from the bus. McGoran!

Another shadow behind him—stealthy. She wanted to scream.

Swirl of motion and the thick thud of fist against flesh and bone. McGoran spun and fell heavily.

As she moved closer she saw Weaver and Dorvan solemnly shaking hands. Dorvan said, "Nice going, boy. You saw me moving in and you didn't blink an eye."

Weaver said, "We got to keep our little group from getting a bad name."

Shirley Sanger came out into the hall, holding a robe around her. Her eyes widened as she saw McGoran.

Dorvan looked up and saw the two of them. He said, "Hi, darling. Hello Jennilou. Look what we got."

Shirley said in an acid tone, "You've got him but can you keep him? What will you tie him up with?"

"Simple," said Stan Weaver expansively. "Every time he wiggles we pop him again. That's work I could learn to love. He wanted the four of us to take over the government. A bunch of fancy ideas about supermen. He didn't want you in on it, Jennilou, and he didn't want the old lady."

"Oh, fine!" Shirley said.

McGoran moaned. Stan Weaver said, "My turn." He chopped McGoran on the

side of the jaw with a blow that would have bent quarter inch steel plate. McGoran settled closer to the floor.

"I'll call Tom—Dr. Bellbight," Jennilou said. "He's in Mr. Dickinson's office."

CHAPTER VII

Date with a Star

DICKINSON drummed nervously on his desk and looked at his watch with irritation. He buzzed the girl and said, "Haven't you located Dr. Bellbight yet?"

He forced a smile. The two men from New Mexico sat near the windows. In the four chairs drawn up close to his desk were Jennilou, Shirley, Stan Weaver and Bill Dorvan.

Dickinson cleared his throat. "Well, we'll begin without Dr. Bellbight. Thanks to Mr. Weaver and Mr. Dorvan we took McGoran into custody ten days ago. He was placed in a cell where the walls carried a heavy enough charge of current to stun him if he touched them. It was quite obvious that McGoran was insane. Four hours ago he died of what

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apparently was a cerebral hemorrhage."

Jennilou looked faintly ill. Shirley gasped. Weaver swallowed hard. Dorvan said softly, "As good a way as any."

"Thus, of the original seven, two are dead. And Mrs. Thompson is out of our reach. Her legal talent is too—ah—fast on its feet. So there are just the four of you. Doubtless you have been puzzled by the tests that you have undergone during the past ten days."

"To put it mildly," said Shirley Sanger.

"Dr. Lamont and Mr. Sherman have prescribed those tests. They came here on a hunch. The hunch has paid off. Oh, there you are, Tom. Sit down. I was just getting to the tests. Want to take over?"

Bellbight nodded. He was very pale.

His voice was harsh and nervous as he said, "We have established the fact that you four can stand extremes of heat and cold far in excess of normal. On the whirl test Mr. Dorvan had the best record. He blacked out at thirty-one G's. To the human in perfect physical condition twelve G's usually results in serious internal injuries, temporary blindness, sometimes death. Take over, Dr. Lamont."

Lamont stood up and shoved his hands deep in his pockets. He had an ugly, likeable face. "In New Mexico we do not publish our little triumphs. Our work is top secret. However, this is so important to us that I must divulge to you certain topsecret information.

"Fourteen months ago we put a small rocket in orbit around the earth. First practical application of atomic power for rocket propulsion. We used a booster set-up with chemical fuel to clear the atmosphere, then a hard burst of atomic drive to take the speed up to the necessary five miles per second to establish the rocket as a satellite of earth.

"Six months ago, using the same technique, we drove a rocket to the moon. That meant achieving a take-off speed of seven miles per second. Our press releases speak of achieving hundred-mile altitudes. Believe me, they are enormous understatements.

"Now we have come to a barrier. That

particular barrier is the limitation on unmanned rockets. Until two weeks ago we thought it an insuperable obstacle. Take-off speed would pulp the average human. But you people could stand it.

"I have four releases here. I will not attempt to sell you anything. Frankly, we want to take the four of you to New Mexico. You'll get no publicity. There will be no medals. I can't promise that you'll live through the flights.

"There will be a year of training while the rockets are under construction. If all goes well, which it probably won't, you'll be the first humans in space. So your choice is either to continue to exist here as sort of laboratory animals or come to New Mexico and have something to do with what I like to call mankind's manifest destiny."

He sat down. Jennilou said softly, "No! No, I can't leave."

WEAVER shrugged. "Brother, once you've driven an interurban bus, you can stand anything. I'd like a change in routes. Get your moon transfers here. Step to the rear of the rocket, please."

"Funny like a crutch," Shirley said. She turned and put her hand on Bill Dorvan's arm. "It's a corny old line, William, but whither thou goest—"

Dorvan smiled weakly. "We'll take two of those papers, Doc."

"That's what I hoped you'd say," Shirley said softly.

Bellbight said suddenly, his voice still tense, "Before you sign you'd better know that it's going to be more than that."

"Shut up, Tom!" Dickinson said.

"You can't shut me up. Listen. It isn't going to be any little trip of a week or a month. At first, yes. But not later. And for the last little jaunt you may go so far that a lifetime won't be long enough to make a round trip.

"You ought to know that. You ought to know that you may live out what remains of your life in the hulk of a rocket resting on some unknown world. You'll be pioneers, certainly. But there won't be any cakes and ale."

Lamont said angrily, "What are you

trying to do, Bellbight."

Tom's voice was so low as to be almost a whisper. "It's hard to understand some things. Why should that transmitter have tipped when it did? Who can either affirm or deny some definite plan in the universe?"

"Are we nasty little freaks of nature, biological accidents, running around in our mechanical anthill just prior to blowing it to bits, or is there something, some force, some entity that watches over us, that makes a transmitter tip, that creates a new form of man strong enough to weather space?"

"For ten days I've been reading genetics. You know what, Lamont? This aberration goes deep. Bill and Shirley are in love. They'll breed true. That's one of your questions, isn't it? I'd stake my life on the answer to that one."

"Very noble language, Bellbight," Sherman said wryly.

"Staking my life?" Tom said. He laughed. "I'm talking like this, you see, because I know all the facts. Ten days ago somebody talked about a glass wall. They couldn't get through it or over it. So I began to wonder if I could cross over to her side."

"Tom!" Jennilou said.

He was at her side in two long strides. He tilted her chin up roughly and bruised her lips with his. He straightened up. "So it can be done, you see. It was a gamble I had to take. I'll leave complete records here, Dick, so that you

can duplicate it without killing the patient."

"Leave?" Dickinson said in a dazed tone. "Where?"

"Dick, you're being dull! Shirley talked about whither thou goest. That phrase makes sense to me. Jennilou and I have a date with a star."

"It would be a good thing to have a physicist in the crew," Sherman said slowly.

WEAVER stood up and leaned across the desk.

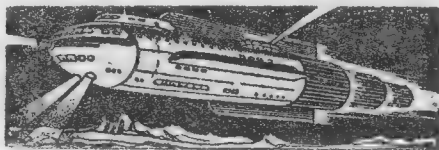
He waved his finger under Dickinson's nose. He said, "My Madge is a miserable woman. She's got a voice like a rusty crosscut saw but I miss her like the devil. What Tom can do to himself you can do to Madge. So help me, I'll talk her into it. If you say no, Dickinson, I'll take this whole plant apart with my bare hands. And don't think I can't."

"Better agree, Dick," Tom said.

"Okay," Dickinson said weakly.

Shirley was the one who wrapped it up. She looked at Jennilou's glowing face and then she looked into Bill Dorvan's eyes.

She said softly, "A big blonde going nowhere fast. That was Shirley. And then I'm a freak. At least it was a change. And now, all of a sudden, I'm no freak. All of a sudden I feel as if this was meant to be. It makes me feel proud—and kind of humble. Kids, let's go buy some of the toughest steaks in town."



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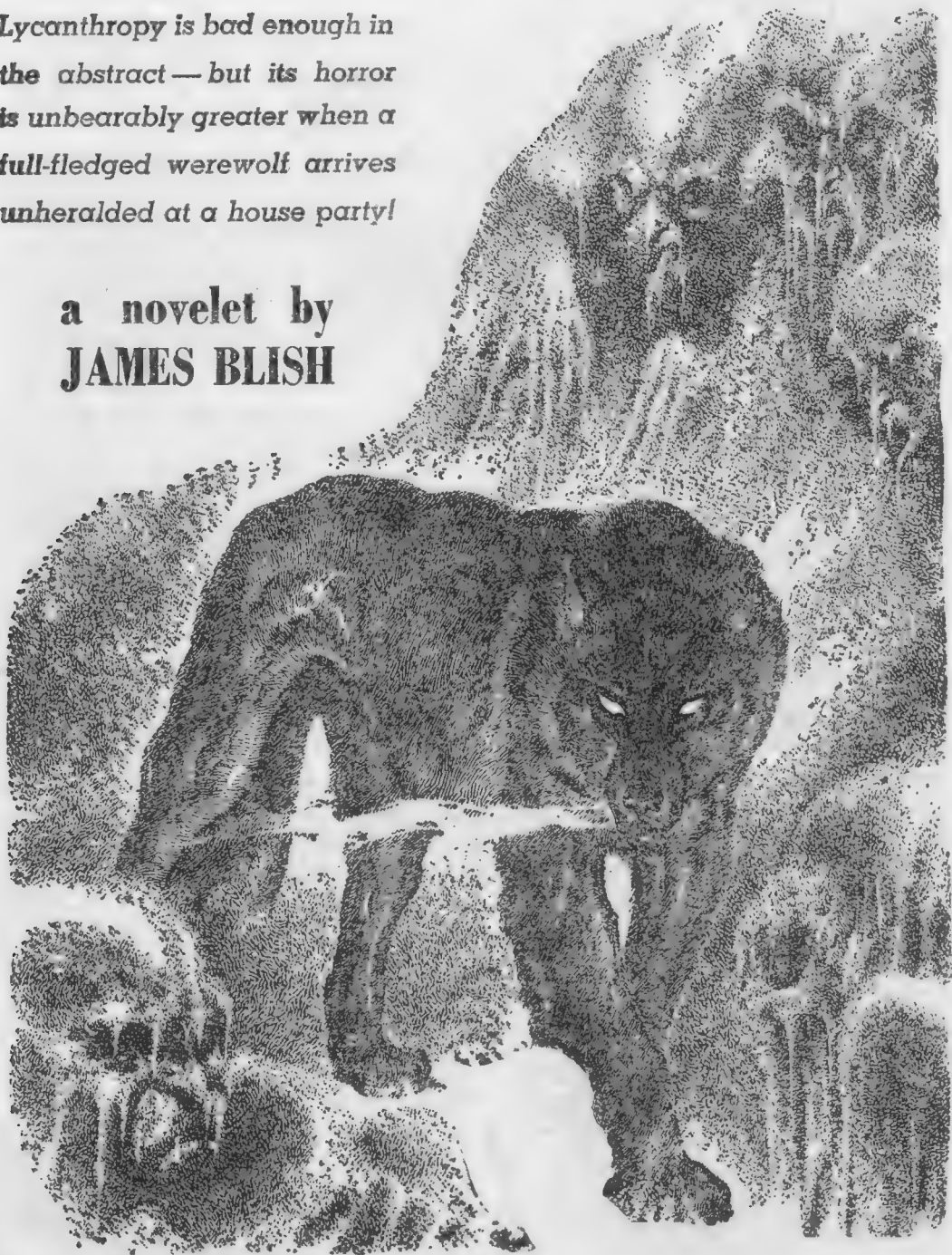
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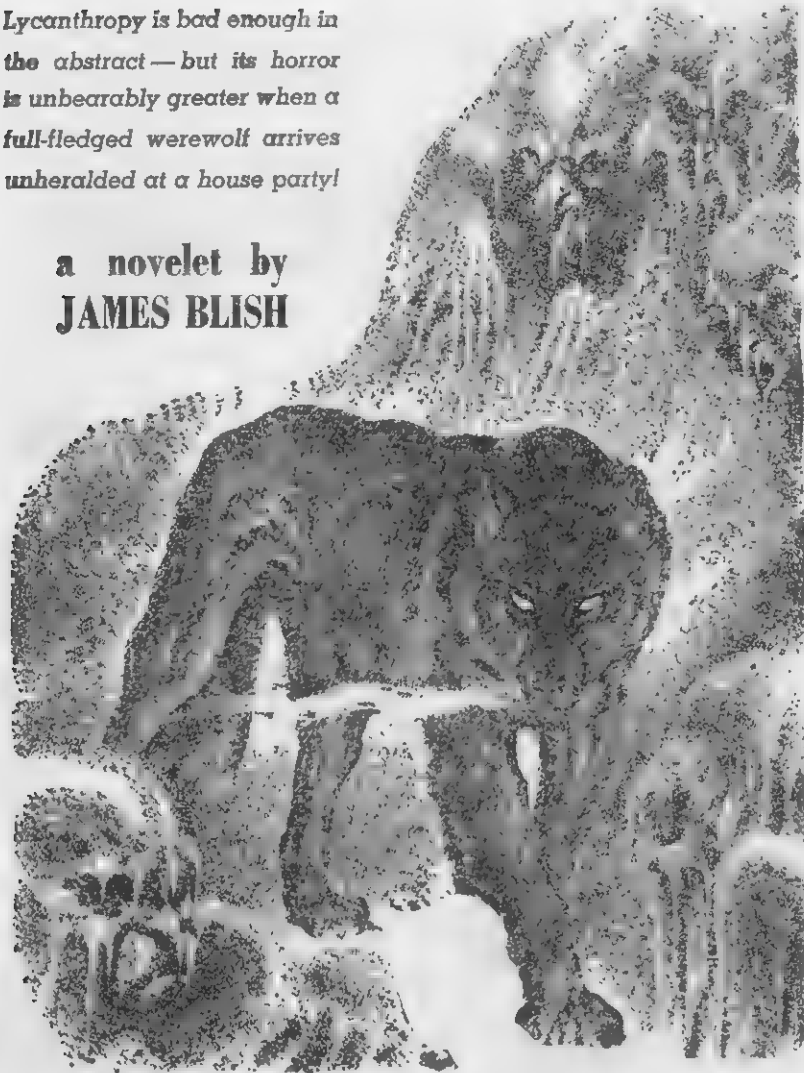
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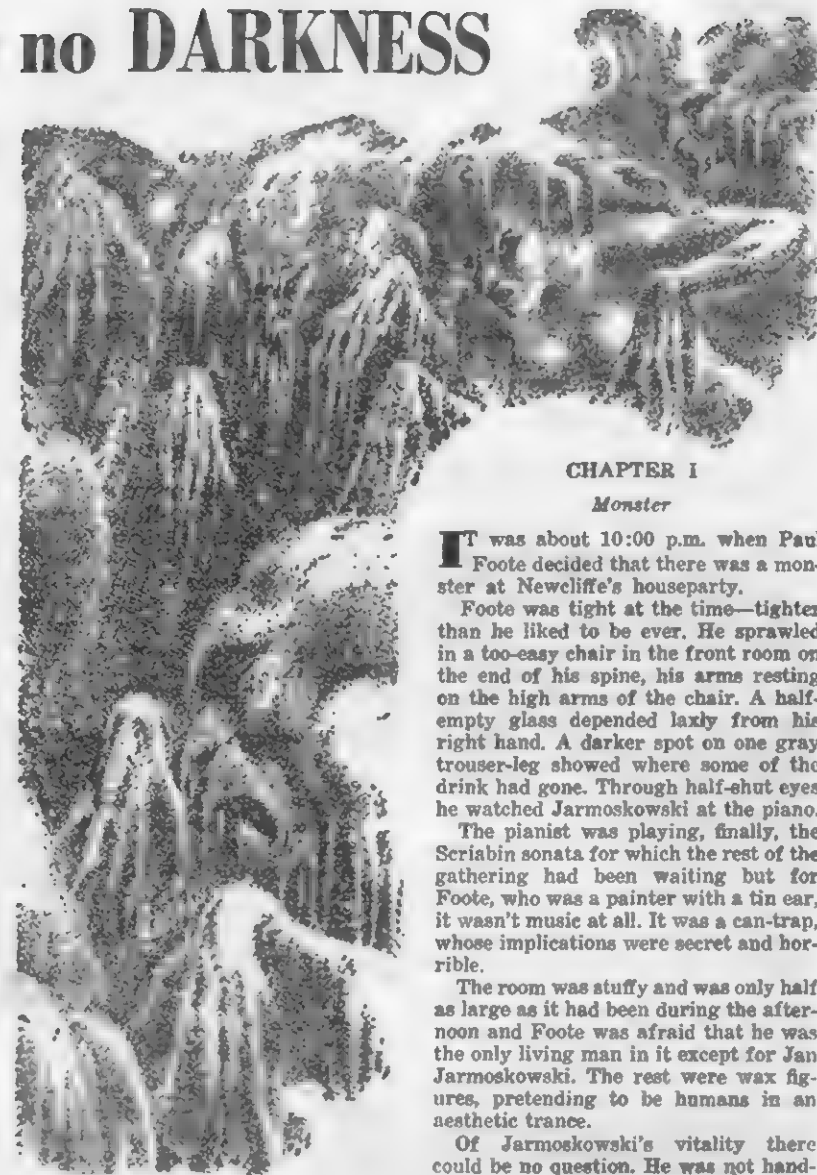
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no DARKNESS



CHAPTER I

Monster

IT was about 10:00 p.m. when Paul Foote decided that there was a monster at Newcliffe's houseparty.

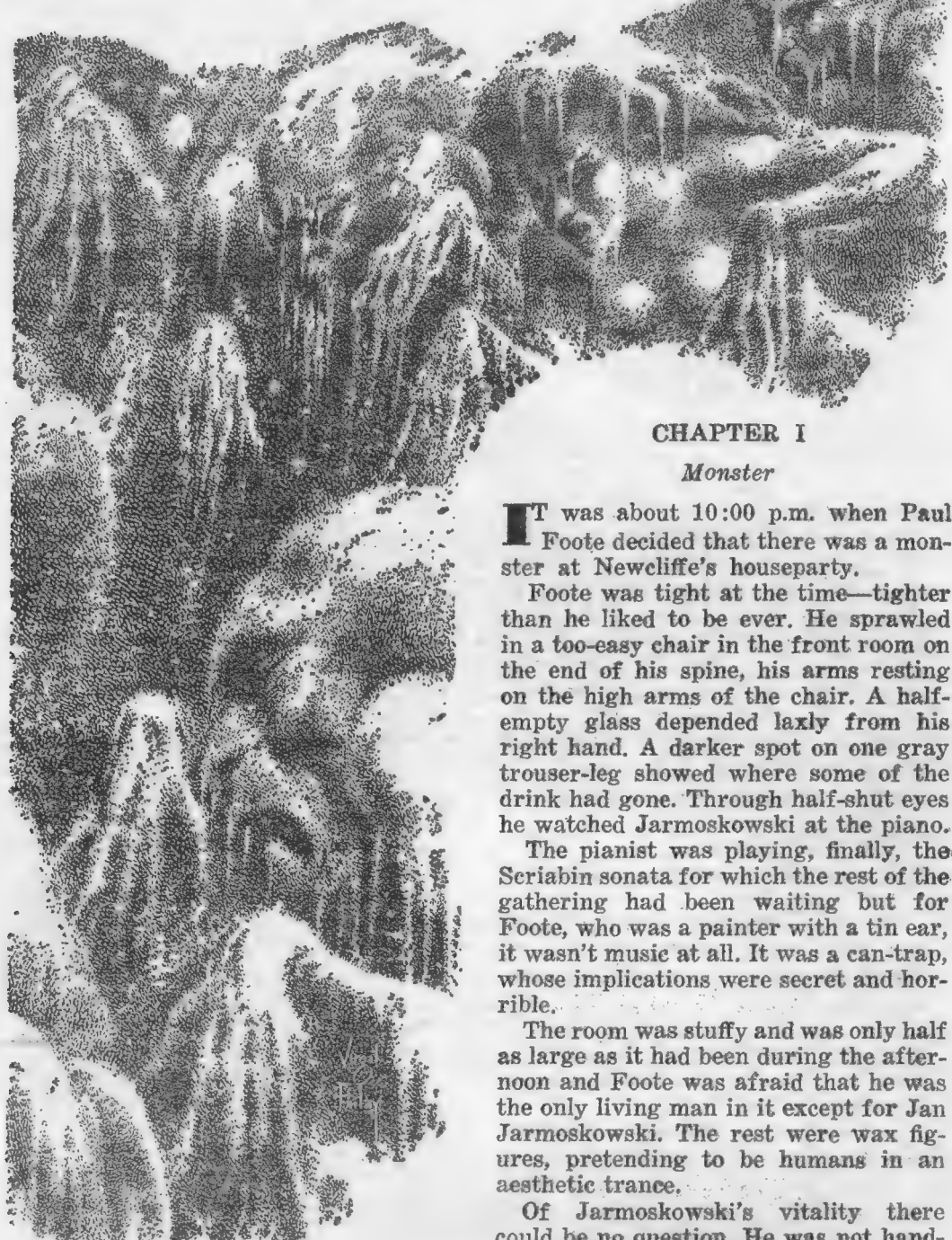
Foote was tight at the time—tighter than he liked to be ever. He sprawled in a too-easy chair in the front room on the end of his spine, his arms resting on the high arms of the chair. A half-empty glass depended laxly from his right hand. A darker spot on one gray trouser-leg showed where some of the drink had gone. Through half-shut eyes he watched Jarmoskowski at the piano.

The pianist was playing, finally, the Scriabin sonata for which the rest of the gathering had been waiting but for Foote, who was a painter with a tin ear, it wasn't music at all. It was a can-trap, whose implications were secret and horrible.

The room was stuffy and was only half as large as it had been during the afternoon and Foote was afraid that he was the only living man in it except for Jan Jarmoskowski. The rest were wax figures, pretending to be humans in an aesthetic trance.

Of Jarmoskowski's vitality there could be no question. He was not hand-

no DARKNESS



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Of Jarmoskowski's vitality there could be no question. He was not hand-

some but there was in him a pure brute force that had its own beauty—that and the beauty of precision with which the force was controlled. When his big hairy hands came down it seemed that the piano should fall into flinders. But the impact of fingers on keys was calculated to the single dyne.

It was odd to see such delicacy behind such a face. Jarmoskowski's hair grew too low on his rounded head despite the fact that he had avoided carefully any suggestion of Musician's Haircut. His brows were straight, rectangular, so shaggy that they seemed to meet.

From where Foote sat he noticed for the first time the odd way the Pole's ears were placed—tilted forward as if in animal attention, so that the vestigial "point" really was in the uppermost position.

They were cocked directly toward the keyboard, reminding Foote irresistibly of the dog on the His Master's Voice trade-mark.

Where had he seen that head before? In Matthias Gruenwald, perhaps—in that panel on the Isenheim Altar that showed the Temptation of St. Anthony. Or was it one of the illustrations in the *Red Grimoire*, those odd old woodcuts that Chris Lundgren called "Rorschak tests of the mediaeval mind"?

Jarmoskowski finished the Scriabin, paused, touched his hands together reflectively, began a work of his own, the *Galliard Fantastique*.

The wax figures did not stir, but a soft eerie sigh of recognition came from their frozen lips.

There was another person in the room but Foote could not tell who it was. When he turned his unfocused eyes to count, his mind went back on him and he never managed to reach a total. But somehow there was the impression of another presence that had not been of the party before.

Jarmoskowski was not the presence. He had been there before. But he had something to do with it. There was an eighth presence now and it had something to do with Jarmoskowski.

What was it?

FOR it was there—there was no doubt about that. The energy which the rest of Foote's senses ordinarily would have consumed was flowing into his instincts now because his senses were numbed. Acutely, poignantly, his instincts told him of the Monster. It hovered around the piano, sat next to Jarmoskowski as he caressed the musical beast's teeth, blended with the long body and the serpentine fingers.

Foote had never had the horrors from drinking before and he knew he did not have them now. A part of his mind which was not drunk had recognized real horror somewhere in this room. And the whole of his mind, its skeptical barriers down, believed and trembled within itself.

The batlike circling of the frantic notes was stilled abruptly. Foote blinked, startled.

"Already?" he said stupidly.

"Already?" Jarmoskowski echoed. "But that's a long piece, Paul. Your fascination speaks well for my writing."

His eyes flashed redly as he looked directly at the painter. Foote tried frantically to remember whether or not his eyes had been red during the afternoon. Or whether it was possible for any man's eyes to be as red at any time as this man's were now.

"The writing?" he said, condensing the far-flung diffusion of his brain. Newcliffe's highballs were damn strong. "Hardly the writing, Jan. Such fingers as those could put fascination into *Three Blind Mice*."

He laughed inside at the parade of emotions which marched across Jarmoskowski's face. Startlement at a compliment from Foote—for there had been an inexplicable antagonism between the two since the pianist had first arrived—then puzzled reflection—then finally veiled anger as the hidden slur bared its fangs in his mind. Nevertheless the man could laugh at it.

"They are long, aren't they?" he said to the rest of the group, unrolling them like the party noisemakers which turn from snail to snake when blown through. "But it's a mistake to suppose that they

assist my playing, I assure you. Mostly they stumble over each other. Especially over this one."

He held up his hands for inspection. Suddenly Foote was trembling. On both hands, the index fingers and the middle fingers were exactly the same length.

"I suppose Lundgren would call me a mutation. It's a nuisance at the piano."

Doris Gilmore, once a student of Jarmoskowski in Prague, and still obviously, painfully, in love with him, shook coppery hair back from her shoulders and held up her own hands.

"My fingers are so stubby," she said ruefully. "Hardly pianist's hands at all."

"The hands of a master pianist," Jarmoskowski said. He smiled, scratching his palms abstractedly, and Foote found himself in a universe of brilliant perfectly-even teeth. No, not perfectly even. The polished rows were bounded almost mathematically by slightly longer cuspids. They reminded him of that idiotic Poe story—was it *Berenice*? Obviously Jarmoskowski would not die a natural death. He would be killed by a dentist for possession of those teeth.

"Three fourths of the greatest pianists I know have hands like truck drivers," Jarmoskowski was saying. "Surgeons too, as Lundgren will tell you. Long fingers tend to be clumsy."

"You seem to manage to make tremendous music, all the same," Newcliffe said, getting up.

"Thank you, Tom." Jarmoskowski seemed to take his host's rising as a signal that he was not going to be required to play any more. He lifted his feet from the pedals and swung them around to the end of the bench. Several of the others rose also. Foote struggled up to numb feet from the infernal depths of the armchair. He set his glass cautiously on the side-table and picked his way over to Christian Lundgren.

"I read your paper, the one you read to the Stockholm Congress," he said, controlling his tongue with difficulty. "Jarmoskowski's hands are—"

"Yes," the psychiatrist said, looking at Foote with sharp, troubled eyes. Sud-

denly Foote was aware of Lundgren's chain of thought. The gray, chubby little man was assessing his drunkenness, and wondering whether or not Foote would have forgotten the whole business in the morning.

Lundgren made a gesture of dismissal. "I saw them," he said, his tone flat. "A mutation probably, as he himself suggests. This is the twentieth century. I'm going to bed and forget it. Which you may take for advice as well as information."

He stalked out of the room, leaving Foote standing alone, wondering whether to be reassured or more alarmed than before. Lundgren should know. Still, if Jarmoskowski was what he seemed—

The party appeared to be surviving quite nicely without Foote. Conversations were starting up about the big room. Jarmoskowski and Doris shared the piano bench and were talking in low tones, punctuated now and then by brilliant arpeggios as the Pole showed her easier ways of handling the work she had played before dinner.

James and Bennington, the American critic, were dissecting James' most recent novel for a fascinated Newcliffe. Blandly innocent Caroline Newcliffe was talking to the air about nothing at all. Nobody missed Lundgren and it seemed unlikely that Foote would be missed.

He walked with wobbly nonchalance into the dining room, where the butler was still clearing the table.

"Scuse me," he said. "Little experiment. Return in the morning." He snatched a knife from the table, looked for the door which led from the dining room into the foyer, propelled himself through it. The hallway was dim but intelligible.

As he closed the door to his room he paused for a moment to listen to Jarmoskowski's technical exhibition on the keys. It might be that at midnight Jarmoskowski would give another sort of exhibition. If he did Foote would be glad to have the knife. He shrugged uneasily, closed the door all the way and walked over to his bedroom window.

AT 11:30, Jarmoskowski stood alone on the terrace of Newcliffe's country house. Although there was no wind the night was frozen with a piercing cold—but he did not seem to notice it. He stood motionless, like a black statue, with only the long streamers of his breathing, like twin jets of steam from the nostrils of a dragon, to show that he was alive.

Through the haze of lace that curtained Foote's window Jarmoskowski was an heroic pillar of black stone—but a pillar above a fumarole.

The front of the house was entirely dark and the moonlight gleamed dully on the snow. In the dim light the heavy tower which was the central structure was like some ancient donjon-keep. Thin slits of embrasures watched the landscape with a dark vacuity and each of the crowning merlons wore a helmet of snow.

The house huddled against the malice of the white night. A sense of age invested it. The curtains smelt of dust and antiquity. It seemed impossible that anyone but Foote and Jarmoskowski could be alive in it. After a long moment Foote moved the curtain very slightly and drew it back.

His face was drenched in moonlight and he drew back into the dark again, leaving the curtains parted.

If Jarmoskowski saw the furtive motion he gave no sign. He remained engrossed in the acerb beauty of the night. Almost the whole of Newcliffe's estate was visible from where he stood. Even the black border of the forest, beyond the golf course to the right, could be seen through the dry frigid air. A few isolated trees stood nearer the house, casting grotesque shadows on the snow, shadows that flowed and changed shape with infinite slowness as the moon moved.

Jarmoskowski sighed and scratched his left palm. His lips moved soundlessly.

A wandering cloud floated idly toward the moon, its shadow preceding it, gliding in a rush of darkness toward the house. The gentle ripples of the snow-

banks contorted in the vast umbra, assumed demon shapes, twisted bodies half-rising from the earth, sinking back, rising again, whirling closer. A damp frigid wind rose briefly, whipping crystalline showers of snow from the terrace flagstones.

The wind died as the shadow engulfed the house. For a long instant the darkness and silence persisted. Then, from somewhere among the stables behind the house, a dog raised his voice in a faint sustained throbbing howl. Others joined him.

Jarmoskowski's teeth gleamed dimly in the occluded moonlight. He stood a moment longer—then his head turned with startling quickness and his eyes flashed a feral scarlet at the dark window where Foote hovered. Foote released the curtains hastily. Even through them he could see the pianist's grim phosphorescent smile. Jarmoskowski went back into the house.

There was a single small light burning in the corridor. Jarmoskowski's room was at the end of the hall next to Foote's. As he walked reflectively toward it the door of the room across from Foote's swung open and Doris Gilmore came out, clad in a housecoat, a towel over her arm and a toothbrush in her hand.

"Oh!" she said. Jarmoskowski turned toward her. Foote slipped behind his back and into Jarmoskowski's room. He did not propose to have Doris a witness to the thing he expected from Jarmoskowski.

In a quieter voice Doris said, "Oh, it's you, Jan. You startled me."

"So I see," Jarmoskowski's voice said. Foote canted one eye around the edge of the door. "It appears that we are the night-owls of the party."

"The rest are tight. Especially that horrible painter. I've been reading the magazines Tom left by my bed and I finally decided to go to sleep too. What have you been doing?"

"Oh, I was just out on the terrace, getting a breath of air. I like the winter night—it bites."

"The dogs are restless, too," she said. "Did you hear them?"

"Yes," Jarmoskowski said and smiled. "Why does a full moon make a dog feel so sorry for himself?"

"Maybe there's a banshee about."

"I doubt it," Jarmoskowski said. "This house isn't old enough to have any family psychopomps. As far as I know none of Tom's or Caroline's relatives have had the privilege of dying in it."

"You talk as if you almost believed it." There was a shiver in her voice. She wrapped the housecoat more tightly about her slim waist.

"I come from a country where belief in such things is common. In Poland most of the skeptics are imported."

"I wish you'd pretend to be an exception," she said. "You give me the creeps."

He nodded seriously. They looked at each other. Then he stepped forward and took her hands in his.

Foote felt a belated flicker of embarrassment. If he were wrong he'd speedily find himself in a position for which no apology would be possible.

The girl was looking up at Jarmoskowski, smiling uncertainly. "Jan," she said.

"No," Jarmoskowski said. "Wait. It has been a long time since Prague."

"I see," she said. She tried to release her hands.

Jarmoskowski said sharply, "You don't see. I was eighteen then. You were—what was it?—eleven, I think. In those days I was proud of your schoolgirl crush but of course infinitely too old for you. I am not so old any more and you are so lovely—no, no, hear me out, please! Doris, I love you now, as I can see you love me, but—"

In the brief pause Foote could hear the sharp indrawn breaths that Doris Gilmore was trying to control. He writhed with shame for himself. He had no business being—

"But we must wait, Doris—until I warn you of something neither of us could have dreamed in the old days."

"Warn me?"

"Yes," Jarmoskowski paused again. Then he said, "You will find it hard to believe. But if you do we may yet be

happy. Doris, I cannot be a skeptic. I am—"

He stopped. He had looked down abstractedly at her hands as if searching for precisely the right words. Then, slowly, he turned her hands over until they rested palms up upon his. An expression of inexpressible shock crossed his face and Foote saw his grip tighten spasmodically.

In that silent moment, Foote knew that he had been right about Jarmoskowski and despite his pleasure he was frightened.

For an instant Jarmoskowski shut his eyes. The muscles along his jaw stood out with the violence with which he was clenching his teeth. Then, deliberately, he folded Doris' hands together and his curious fingers made a fist about them. When his eyes opened again they were red as flame in the weak light.

Doris jerked her hands free and crossed them over her breasts. "Jan—what is it? What's the matter?"

His face, that should have been flying into flinders under the force of the thing behind it, came under control muscle by muscle.

"Nothing," he said. "There's really no point in what I was going to say. Nice to have seen you again, Doris. Goodnight."

He brushed past her, walked the rest of the way down the corridor, wrenched back the doorknob of his own room. Foote barely managed to get out of his way.

Behind the house a dog howled and was silent again.

CHAPTER II

A Variety of Horrors

IN Jarmoskowski's room the moonlight played in through the open window upon a carefully turned-down bed and the cold air had penetrated every cranny. He shut the door and went directly across the room to the table beside his bed. As he crossed the path of

silvery light his shadow was oddly foreshortened, so that it looked as if it were walking on all fours. There was a lamp on the side table and he reached for it.

Then he stopped dead still, his hand halfway to the switch. He seemed to be listening. Finally, he turned and looked back across the room, directly at the spot behind the door where Foote was standing.

It was the blackest spot of all, for it had its back to the moon. But Jarmoskowski said immediately, "Hello, Paul. Aren't you up rather late?"

Foote did not reply for a while. His senses were still a little alcohol-numbed and he was overwhelmed by the sheer outrageous impossibility of the thing he knew to be true. He stood silently in the darkness, watching the Pole's barely-visible figure beside the fresh bed, and the sound of his own breathing was loud in his ears. The broad flat streamer of moonlight lay between them like a metallic river.

"I'm going to bed shortly," he said at last. His voice sounded flat and dead and faraway, as if belonging to someone else entirely. "I just came to issue a little warning."

"Well, well," said Jarmoskowski pleasantly. "Warnings seem to be all the vogue this evening. Do you customarily pay your social calls with a knife in your hand?"

"That's the warning, Jarmoskowski. The knife is—a *silver* knife."

"You must be drunker than ever," said the pianist. "Why don't you just go to bed? We can talk about it in the morning."

"Don't give me that," Foote snapped savagely. "You can't fool me. I know you for what you are."

"All right. I'll bite, as Bennington would say."

"Yes, you'd bite," Foote said and his voice shook a little despite himself. "Shall I give it a name, Jarmoskowski? In Poland they called you *Vrolok*, didn't they? And in France it was *loup-garou*. In the Carpathians it was *stregoica* or *strega* or *Vlkoslak*."

"Your command of languages is great-

er than your common sense. But you interest me strangely. Isn't it a little out of season for such things? The aconites do not bloom in the dead of winter. And perhaps the thing you call so many fluent names is also out of season in nineteen sixty-two."

"The dogs hate you," Foote said softly. "That was a fine display Brucey put on when Tom brought him in from his run and he found you here. Walked sideways through the room, growling, watching you with every step until Tom dragged him out. He's howling now. And that shock you got from the table silver at dinner—I heard your excuse about rubber-soled shoes."

"I looked under the table, if you recall, and your shoes turned out to be leather-soled. But it was a pretty feeble excuse anyhow, for anybody knows that you can't get an electric shock from an ungrounded piece of tableware, no matter how long you've been scuffing rubber. It was the silver that hurt you the first time you touched it. Silver's deadly, isn't it?"

"And those fingers—the index fingers as long as the middle ones—you were clever about those. You were careful to call everybody's attention to them. It's supposed to be the obvious that everybody misses. But Jarmoskowski, that 'Purloined Letter' gag has been worked too often in detective stories. It didn't fool Lundgren and it didn't fool me."

"Ah," Jarmoskowski said. "Quite a catalogue."

"There's more. How does it happen that your eyes were grey all afternoon and turned red as soon as the moon rose? And the palms of your hands—there was some hair growing there but you shaved it off, didn't you, Jarmoskowski? I've been watching you scratch them. Everything about you, the way you look, the way you act—everything you say screams your nature in a dozen languages to anyone who knows the signs."

After a long silence Jarmoskowski said, "I see. You've been most attentive, Paul—I see you are what people call the suspicious drunk. But I appreciate your

warning, Paul. Let us suppose that what you say of me is true. Have you thought that, knowing that you know, I would have no choice anymore? That the first word you said to me about it all might brand *your* palm with the pentagram?"

Foote had not thought about it. He had spent too much time trying to convince himself that it was all a pipe dream. A shock of blinding terror convulsed him. The silver knife clattered to the floor. He snatched up his hands and stared frantically at them, straining his eyes through the blackness. The full horror implicit in Jarmoskowski's suggestion struck him all at once with paralyzing force.

From the other side of his moonlit room, Jarmoskowski's voice came mockingly. "So—you hadn't thought. *Better never than late, Paul!*"

The dim figure of Jarmoskowski began to writhe and ripple in the reflected moonlight. It foreshortened, twisting obscenely, sinking toward the floor, flesh and clothing alike *changing* into something not yet describable.

A cry ripped from Foote's throat and he willed his legs to move with frantic, nightmarish *u r g e n c y*. His clutching hand grasped the doorknob. Tearing his eyes from the hypnotic fascination of the thing that was going on across from him he leaped from his corner and out into the corridor.

A bare second after he had slammed the door, something struck it a frightful blow from the inside. The paneling split. He held it shut with all the strength in his body.

A DIM white shape drifted down upon him through the dark corridor and a fresh spasm of fear sent rivers of sweat down his back, his sides, into his eyes. But it was only the girl.

"Paul! What on earth! What's the matter!"

"Quick!" he choked out. "Get something silver—something heavy made out of silver—quick, *quick!*"

Despite her astonishment the frantic urgency in his voice was enough. She darted back into her room.

To Foote it seemed eternity before she returned—an eternity while he listened with abnormally sensitized ears for a sound inside the room. Once he thought he heard a low growl but he was not sure. The sealike hissing and sighing of his blood, rushing through the channels of the inner ear, seemed very loud to him. He couldn't imagine why it was not arousing the whole country-side. He clung to the doorknob and panted.

Then the girl was back, bearing a silver candlestick nearly three feet in length—a weapon that was almost too good, for his fight-weakened muscles had some difficulty in lifting it. He shifted his grip on the knob to his left hand, hefted the candlestick awkwardly.

"All right," he said, in what he hoped was a grim voice. "Now let him come."

"What in heaven's name is this all about?" Doris said. "You're waking everybody in the house with this racket. Look—even one of the dogs is in to see—"

"*The dog!*"

He swung around, releasing the doorknob. Not ten paces from them, an enormous coal-black animal, nearly five feet in length, grinned at them with polished fangs. As soon as it saw Foote move it snarled. Its eyes gleamed red in the single bulb.

It sprang.

Foote lifted the candlestick high and brought it down—but the animal was not there. Somehow the leap was never completed. There was a brief flash of movement at the open end of the corridor, then darkness and silence.

"He saw the candlestick," Foote panted. "Must have jumped out the window and come around through the front door. Saw the silver and beat it."

"Paul!" Doris cried. "What—how did you know that thing would jump? It was so big! Silver—"

He chuckled, surprising even himself. He had a mental picture of what the truth would sound like to Doris. "That," he said, "was a wolf and a whopping one. Even the usual kind of wolf isn't very friendly and—"

Footsteps sounded on the floor above and the voice of Newcliffe, grumbling loudly, came down the stairs. Newcliffe liked his evenings noisy and his nights quiet. The whole house seemed to have heard the commotion, for in a moment a number of half-clad figures were elbowing out into the corridor, wanting to know what was up.

Abruptly the lights went on, revealing blinking faces and pajama-clad forms struggling into robes. Newcliffe came down the stairs. Caroline was with him, impeccable even in disarray, her face openly and honestly ignorant and unashamedly beautiful. She made an excellent foil for Tom. She was no lion-hunter but she loved parties. Evidently she was pleased that the party was starting again.

"What's all this?" Newcliffe demanded in a gravelly voice. "Foote, are you the center of this whirlpool? Why all the noise?"

"Werewolf," said Foote, suddenly very conscious of how meaningless the word would be here. "We've got a werewolf here. And somebody's marked out for him."

How else could you put it? Let it stand.

There was a chorus of "What's" as the group jostled about him. "Eh? What was that? . . . Werewolf, I thought he said . . . What's this all about? . . . Somebody's been a wolf . . . Is that new? . . . What an uproar!"

"Paul," Lundgren's voice cut through. "Details, please."

"Jarmoskowski's a werewolf," Foote said grimly, making his tone as emotionless and factual as he could. "I suspected it earlier tonight and went into his room and accused him of it. He changed shape, right on the spot while I was watching."

The sweat started out afresh at the recollection of that horrible, half-seen mutation. "He came around into the hall and went for us and I scared him off with a silver candlestick for a club." He realized suddenly that he still held the candlestick, brandished it as proof. "Doris saw the wolf—she'll vouch for that."

"I saw a big doglike thing, all right," Doris admitted. "And it did jump at us. It was black and had huge teeth. But—Paul, was that supposed to be Jan? Why, that's ridiculous!"

"It certainly is," Newcliffe said feelingly. "Getting us all up for a practical joke. Probably one of the dogs is loose."

"Do you have any coal-black dogs five feet long?" Foote demanded desperately. "And where's Jarmoskowski now? Why isn't he here? Answer me that!"

Bennington gave a skeptical grunt from the background and opened Jarmoskowski's door. The party tried to jam itself into the room. Foote forced his way through the jam.

"See? He isn't here, either. And the bed's not been slept in. Doris, you saw him go in there. Did you see him come out?"

The girl looked startled. "No, but I was in my room—"

"All right. Here. Look at this." Foote led the way over to the window and pointed. "See? The prints on the snow?"

One by one the others leaned out. There was no arguing it. A set of animal prints, like large dogtracks, led away from a spot just beneath Jarmoskowski's window—a spot where the disturbed snow indicated the landing of some heavy body.

"Follow them around," Foote said. "They lead around to the front door, and in."

"Have you traced them?" James asked.

"I don't have to. I saw the thing, James."

"Maybe he just went for a walk," Caroline suggested.

"Barefoot? There are his shoes."

BENNINGTON vaulted over the windowsill with an agility astonishing for so round a man and plowed away with slippered feet along the line of tracks. A little while later he entered the room behind their backs.

"Paul's right," he said, above the hubbub of excited conversation. "The tracks go around to the front door, then come out again and go away around the side

of the house toward the golf course." He rolled up his wet pajama-cuffs awkwardly.

"This is crazy," Newcliffe declared angrily. "This is the twentieth century. We're like a lot of little children, panicked by darkness. There's no such thing as a werewolf!"

"I wouldn't place any wagers on that," James said. "Millions of people have thought so for hundreds of years. That's a lot of people."

Newcliffe turned sharply to Lundgren. "Chris, I can depend upon you at least to have your wits about you."

The psychiatrist smiled wanly. "You didn't read my Stockholm paper, did you, Tom? I mean my paper on mental diseases. Most of it dealt with lycanthropy—werewolfism."

"You mean—you believe this idiot story?"

"I spotted Jarmoskowski early in the evening," Lundgren said. "He must have shaved the hair on his palms but he has all the other signs—eyes bloodshot with moonrise, first and second fingers of equal length, pointed ears, domed prefrontal bones, elongated upper cuspids or fangs—in short, the typical hyperpineal type—a lycanthrope."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I have a natural horror of being laughed at," Lundgren said drily. "And I didn't want to draw Jarmoskowski's attention to me. These endocrine-imbalance cases have a way of making enemies very easily."

Foote grinned ruefully. If he had thought of that part of it before accusing Jarmoskowski he would have kept his big mouth shut.

"Lycanthropy is quite common," Lundgren droned, "but seldom mentioned. It is the little-known aberration of a little-known ductless gland. It appears to enable the victim to control his body."

"I'm still leery of this whole business," Bennington growled, from somewhere deep in his pigeon's chest. "I've known Jan for years. Nice fella—did a lot for me once. And I think there's enough discord in this house so that I

won't add to it much if I say I wouldn't trust Paul Foote as far as I could throw him. By heaven, Paul, if this does turn out to be some practical joke of yours—"

"Ask Lundgren," Foote said.

There was dead silence, broken only by heavy breathing. Lundgren was known to every one of them as the world's ultimate authority on hormone-created insanity. Nobody seemed to want to ask him.

"Paul's right," Lundgren said at last. "Take it or leave it. Jarmoskowski is a lycanthrope. A hyper-pineal. No other gland could affect the blood-vessels of the eyes like that or make such a reorganization of the cells possible. Jarmoskowski is inarguably a werewolf."

Bennington sagged, the light of righteous incredulity dying from his eyes. "I'll be damned!" he muttered.

"We've got to get him tonight," Foote said. "He's seen the pentagram on somebody's palm—somebody in the party."

"What's that?" asked James.

"Common illusion of lycanthropic seizures," Lundgren said. "Hallucination, I should say. A five-pointed star inscribed in a circle—you find it in all the old mystical books, right back to the so-called fourth and fifth Books of Moses. The werewolf sees it on the palm of his next victim."

There was a gasping little scream from Doris. "So that's it!" she cried. "Dear God, I'm the one! He saw something on my hand tonight while we were talking in the hall. He was awfully startled and went away without another word. He said he was going to warn me about something and then he—"

"Steady," Bennington said in a soft voice that had all the penetrating power of a thunderclap. "There's safety in numbers. We're all here." Nevertheless, he could not keep himself from glancing surreptitiously over his shoulder.

"Well, that settles it," James said in earnest squeaky tones. "We've got to trail the—the beast and kill him. It should be easy to follow his trail in the snow. We must kill him before he kills Doris or somebody else. Even if he misses us it would be just as bad to have him

roaming the countryside."

"What are you going to kill him with?" asked Lundgren matter-of-factly.

"Eh?"

"I said, what are you going to kill him with? With that pineal hormone in his blood he can laugh at any ordinary bullet. And since there are no chapels dedicated to St. Hubert around here you can't scare him to death with a church-blessed bullet."

"Silver will do," Foote said.

"Yes, silver will do. It poisons the pinearin-catalysis. But are you going out to hunt a full-grown wolf, a giant wolf, armed with table silver and candlesticks? Or is somebody here metallurgist enough to cast a decent silver bullet?"

Foote sighed. With the burden of proof lifted from him, completely sobered up by shock, he felt a little more like his old self, despite the pall of horror which hung over them.

"Like I always tell my friends," he said, "there's never a dull moment at a Newcliffe houseparty."

CHAPTER III

The Forest in Darkness

THE clock struck one-thirty. Foote picked up one of Newcliffe's rifles and hefted it. It felt—useless. He said, "How are you coming?"

The group by the kitchen stove shook their heads in comical unison. One of the gas burners had been jury-rigged as a giant Bunsen burner and they were trying to melt down some soft unalloyed silver articles, mostly of Mexican manufacture.

They were using a small earthenware bowl, also Mexican, for a crucible. It was lidded with the bottom of a flower pot, the hole in which had been plugged with a mixture of garden clay and rock wool yanked forcibly out of the insulation in the attic. The awkward flame leapt uncertainly and sent fantastic shadows

flickering over their intent faces.

"We've got it melted, all right," Bennington said, lifting the lid cautiously with a pair of kitchen tongs and peering in. "But what do we do now? Drop it from the top of the tower?"

"You can't kill a wolf with buckshot," Newcliffe pointed out. Now that the problem had been reduced temporarily from a hypernatural one to ordinary hunting he was in his element. "And I haven't got a decent shotgun here anyhow. But we ought to be able to whack together a mold. The bullet should be soft enough so that it won't ruin the rifling of my guns."

He opened the door to the cellar stairs and disappeared, carrying several ordinary cartridges in one hand. Faintly the dogs renewed their howling and Doris began to tremble. Foote put his arm around her.

"It's all right," he said. "We'll get him. You're safe enough."

She swallowed. "I know," she agreed in a small voice. "But every time I think of the way he looked at my hands and how red his eyes were— You don't suppose he's prowling around the house? That that's what the dogs are howling about?"

"I don't know," Foote said carefully. "But dogs are funny that way. They can sense things at great distances. I suppose a man with pinearin in his blood would have a strong odor to them. But he probably knows that we're after his scalp, so he won't be hanging around if he's smart."

She managed a tremulous smile. "All right," she said. "I'll try not to be frightened." He gave her an awkward reassuring pat, feeling a little absurd.

"Do you suppose we can use the dogs?" James wanted to know.

"Certainly," said Lundgren. "Dogs have always been our greatest allies against the abnormal. You saw what a rage Jarmoskowski's very presence put Brucey in this afternoon. He must have smelled the incipient seizure. Ah, Tom— what did you manage?"

Newcliffe set a wooden box on the table. "I pried the slug out of one shell

for each gun," he said, "and made impressions in clay. The cold has made the stuff pretty hard, so it's a passable mold. Bring the silver over here."

Bennington lifted his improvised crucible from the burner, which immediately shot up a tall blue flame. James carefully turned it off.

"All right, pour," Newcliffe said. "Lundgren, you don't suppose it might help to chant a blessing or something?"

"Not unless Jarmoskowski overheard it—probably not even then since we haven't a priest among us."

"Okay. Pour, Bennington, before the goo hardens."

Bennington decanted sluggishly molten silver into each depression in the clay and Newcliffe cleaned away the oozy residue from the casts before it had time to thicken. At any other time the whole scene would have been funny—now it was grimly grotesque. Newcliffe picked up the box and carried it back down to the cellar, where the emasculated cartridges awaited their new slugs.

"Who's going to carry these things, now?" Foote asked. "There are five rifles. James, how about you?"

"I couldn't hit an elephant's rump at three paces. Tom's an expert shot. So is Bennington here, with a shotgun anyhow."

"I can use a rifle," Bennington said diffidently.

"I've done some shooting," Foote said. "During the Battle of the Bulge I even hit something."

"I," Lundgren said, "am an honorary member of the Swiss Militia."

Nobody laughed. Most of them were aware that Lundgren in his own obscure way was bragging, that he had something to brag about. Newcliffe appeared abruptly from the cellar.

"I pried 'em loose, cooled 'em with snow and rolled 'em out with a file. They're probably badly crystallized but we needn't let that worry us."

HE put one cartridge in the chamber of each rifle and shot the bolts home. "There's no sense in loading these any more thoroughly—ordinary bullets

are no good anyhow, Chris says. Just make your first shots count. Who's elected?"

Foote, Lundgren and Bennington each took a rifle. Newcliffe took the fourth and handed the last one to his wife.

"I say, wait a minute," James objected. "Do you think that's wise, Tom? I mean, taking Caroline along?"

"Why certainly," Newcliffe said, looking surprised. "She shoots like a fiend—she's snatched prizes away from me a couple of times. I thought *everybody* was going along."

"That isn't right," Foote said. "Especially not Doris, since the wolf—that is, I don't think she ought to go."

"Are you going to leave her here by herself?"

"Oh no!" Doris cried. "Not here! I've got to go! I don't want to wait all alone in this house. He might come back, and there'd be nobody here. I couldn't stand it!"

"We're *all* going," Newcliffe concluded. "We can't leave Doris here unprotected and we need Caroline's marksmanship. Let's get going. It's two now."

He put on his heavy coat and with the heavy-eyed butler, went out to get the dogs. The rest of the company got out their own heavy clothes. Doris and Caroline climbed into ski-suits. They assembled one by one in the living room. Lundgren's eyes swung on a vase of iris-like flowers.

"Hello, what's this?" he said.

"Monkshood," Caroline informed him. "We grow it in the greenhouse. It's pretty, isn't it? Though the gardener says it's poisonous."

"Chris," Foote said. "That isn't wolfbane, is it?"

The psychiatrist shook his head. "I'm no botanist. I can't tell one aconite from the other. But it hardly matters. Hyper-pineals are allergic to the whole group. The pollen, you see. As in hay fever your hyper-pineal breathes the pollen, anaphylaxis sets in and—"

"The last twist of the knife," James murmured.

A clamoring of dogs outside announced that Newcliffe was ready. With

somber faces the party filed out through the front door. For some reason all of them avoided stepping on the wolf's prints in the snow. Their mien was that of condemned prisoners on the way to the tumbrels. Lundgren took one of the sprigs of flowers from the vase.

The moon had passed its zenith and was almost halfway down the sky, projecting the Bastille-like shadow of the house before it. But there was still plenty of light and the house itself was glowing from basement to tower room. Lundgren located Brucey in the milling yapping pack and abruptly thrust the sprig of flowers under his muzzle. The animal sniffed once, then crouched back and snarled softly.

"Wolfbane," Lundgren said. "Dogs don't react to the other aconites—basis of the legend, no doubt. Better fire your gardener, Caroline. In the end he's to blame for all this in the dead of winter. Lycanthropy normally is an autumn affliction."

James said,

"Even a man who says his prayers
Before he sleeps each night
May turn to a wolf when the wolfbane
blossoms
And the moon is high and bright."

"Stop it, you give me the horrors," Foote snapped angrily.

"Well, the dog knows now," said Newcliffe. "Good. It would have been hard for them to pick up the spoor from cold snow but Brucey can lead them. Let's go."

The tracks of the wolf were clear and sharp in the snow. It had formed a hard crust from which fine, powdery showers of tiny ice-crystals were whipped by a fitful wind. The tracks led around the side of the house and out across the golf course. The little group plodded grimly along beside them. The spoor was cold for the dogs but every so often they would pick up a faint trace and go bounding ahead, yanking their master after them. For the most part however the party had to depend upon its eyes.

A heavy mass of clouds had gathered in the west. The moon dipped lower.

Foote's shadow, grotesquely lengthened, marched on before him and the crusted snow crunched and crackled beneath his feet. There was a watchful unnaturally-still atmosphere to the night and they all moved in tense silence except for a few subdued growls and barks from the dogs.

Once the marks of the werewolf doubled back a short distance, then doubled again as if the monster had turned for a moment to look back at the house before continuing his prowling. For the most part however the trail led directly toward the dark boundary of the woods.

As the brush began to rise about them they stopped by mutual consent and peered warily ahead, rifles held ready for instant action. Far out across the countryside behind them, the great cloud-shadow once more began its sailing. The brilliantly-lit house stood out fantastically in the gloom.

"Should have turned those out," Newcliffe muttered, looking back. "Outlines us."

The dogs strained at their leashes. In the black west was an inaudible muttering as of winter thunder. Brucey pointed a quivering nose at the woods and growled.

"He's in there, all right."

"We'd better step on it," Bennington said, whispering. "Going to be plenty dark in about five minutes. Storm."

Still they hesitated, regarding the menacing darkness of the forest. Then Newcliffe waved his gun hand in the conventional deploy-as-skirmishers signal and plowed forward. The rest spread out in a loosely-spaced line and followed and Foote's finger trembled over his trigger.

THE forest in the shrouded darkness was a place of clutching brittle claws, contorted bodies, and the briefly-glimpsed demon-faces of ambushed horrors. It was Dante's jungle, the woods of Purgatory, where each tree was a body frozen in agony and branches were gnarled arms and fingers which groaned in the wind or gave sharp tiny tinkling

screams as they were broken off.

The underbrush grasped at Foote's legs. His feet broke jarringly through the crust of snow or were supported by it when he least expected support. His shoulders struck unseen tree-trunks. Imagined things sniffed frightfully at his heels or slunk about him just beyond his range of vision. The touch of a hand was enough to make him jump and smother an involuntary outcry. The dogs strained and panted, weaving, no longer snarling, silent with a vicious intentness.

"They've picked up something, all right," Bennington whispered. "Turn 'em loose, Tom?"

Newcliffe bent and snapped the leashes free. Without a sound the animals shot ahead and disappeared.

Over the forest the oncoming storm-clouds crawled across the moon. Total blackness engulfed them. The beam of a powerful flashlight lanced from Newcliffe's free hand, picking out a path of tracks on the brush-littered snow. The rest of the night drew in closer about the blue-white ray.

"Hate to do this," Newcliffe said. "It gives us away. But he knows we're—Hello, it's snowing."

"Let's go then," Foote said. "The tracks will be blotted out shortly."

A terrible clamorous baying rolled suddenly through the woods. "That's it!" Newcliffe shouted. "Listen to them! Go get him, Brucey!"

They crashed ahead. Foote's heart was beating wildly, his nerves at an impossible pitch. The belling cry of the dogs echoed all around him, filling the universe with noise.

"They must have sighted him," he panted. "What a racket! They'll raise the whole countryside."

They plowed blindly through the snow-filled woods. Then, without any interval, they stumbled into a small clearing. Snowflakes flocculated the air. Something dashed between Foote's legs, snapping savagely, and he tripped and fell into a drift.

A voice shouted something indistinguishable. Foote's mouth was full of snow. He jerked his head up—and looked

straight into the red rage-glowing eyes of the wolf.

It was standing on the other side of the clearing, facing him, the dogs leaping about it, snapping furiously at its legs. It made no sound at all but crouched tiger-fashion, its lips drawn back in a grinning travesty of Jarmoskowski's smile. It lashed at the dogs as they came closer. One of the dogs already lay writhing on the ground, a dark pool spreading from it, staining the snow.

"Shoot, for-heaven's sake!" somebody screamed.

Newcliffe clapped his rifle to his shoulder, then lowered it indecisively. "I can't," he said. "The dogs are in the way."

"The heck with the dogs!" James shouted. "This is no fox-hunt! Shoot, Tom, you're the only one of us that's clear."

It was Foote who fired first. The rifle's flat crack echoed through the woods and snow puffed up in a little explosion by the wolf's left hind pad. A concerted groan arose from the party and Newcliffe's voice thundered above it, ordering his dogs back. Bennington aimed with inexorable care.

The werewolf did not wait. With a screaming snarl he burst through the ring of dogs and charged.

Foote jumped in front of Doris, throwing one arm across his throat. The world dissolved into rolling, twisting pandemonium, filled with screaming and shouting and the frantic hatred of dogs. The snow flew thick. Newcliffe's flashlight rolled away and lay on the snow, regarding the tree-tops with an idiot stare.

Then there was the sound of a heavy body moving swiftly away. The shouting died gradually.

"Anybody hurt?" James' voice asked. There was a general chorus of no's. Newcliffe retrieved his flashlight and played it about but the snowfall had reached blizzard proportions and the light showed nothing but shadows and cold confetti.

"He got away," Bennington said.

"And the snow will cover his tracks. Better call your dogs back, Tom."

"They're back," Newcliffe said. "When I call them off they come off."

He bent over the body of the injured animal, which was still twitching feebly. "So—so," he said softly. "So—Brucey. Easy—easy. So, Brucey—so."

Still murmuring, he brought his rifle into position with one arm. The dog's tail beat feebly against the snow.

"So, Brucey."

The rifle crashed.

Newcliffe arose, and looked away. "It looks as if we lose round one," he said tonelessly.

CHAPTER IV

The Night Must End

IT seemed to become daylight very quickly. The butler went phlegmatically around the house, snapping off the lights. If he knew what was going on he gave no sign of it.

"Cappy?" Newcliffe said into the phone. "Listen and get this straight—it's important. Send a cable to Consolidated Warfare Service—no, no, not the Zurich office, they've offices in London—and place an order for a case of .44 calibre rifle cartridges."

"Listen to me, dammit, I'm not through yet—with *silver slugs*. Yes, that's right—silver—and it had better be the pure stuff, too. No, not sterling, that's too hard. Tell them I want them flown over, and that they've got to arrive here tomorrow. Yes, I know it's impossible but if you offer them enough—yes, of course I'll cover it. Got that?"

"Garlic," Lundgren said to Caroline. She wrote it dutifully on her marketing list. "How many windows does this place have? All right, make it one clove for each and get half a dozen boxes of rosemary, too."

He turned to Foote. "We must cover every angle," he said somberly. "As soon as Tom gets off the phone I'll try to

raise the local priest and get him out here with a truckload of silver crucifixes. Understand, Paul, there is a strong physiological basis behind all that mediæval mumbo-jumbo.

"The herbs are anti-spasmodics—they act rather as ephedrine does in hay-fever to reduce the violence of the seizure. It's possible that Jan may not be able to maintain the wolf shape if he gets a good enough sniff. As for the religious trappings, that's all psychological.

"If Jan happens to be a skeptic in such matters they won't bother him but I suspect he's—" Lundgren's English abruptly gave out. The word he wanted obviously was not in his vocabulary. "*Aberglaebig*," he said. "*Criandre*."

"Superstitious?" Foote suggested, smiling grimly.

"Yes. Yes, certainly. Who has better reason, may I ask?"

"But how does he maintain the wolf shape at all?"

"Oh, that's the easiest part. You know how water takes the shape of a vessel it sits in? Well, protoplasm is a liquid. This pineal hormone lowers the surface-tension of the cells and at the same time short-circuits the sympathetic nervous system directly to the cerebral cortex.

"Result, a plastic, malleable body within limits. A wolf is easiest because the skeletons are so similar—not much pinearin can do with bone, you see. An ape would be easier, but apes don't eat people."

"And vampires? Are they just advanced cases of the same thing?"

"Vampires," said Lundgren pontifically, "are people we put in padded cells. It's impossible to change the bony structure *that* much. They just think they're bats. But yes, it's advanced hyperpinealism. In the last stages it is quite something to see.

"The surface tension is lowered so much that the cells begin to boil away. Pretty soon there is just a mess. The process is arrested when the vascular system can no longer circulate the hormone but of course the victim is dead long before that."

"No cure?"

"None yet. Someday perhaps, but until then—We will be doing Jan a favor."

"Also," Newcliffe was saying, "drive over and pick me up six Browning automatic rifles. Never mind the bipods, just the rifles themselves. What? Well, you might call it a siege. All right, Cappy. No, I won't be in today. Pay everybody off and send them home until further notice."

"It's a good thing," Foote said, "that Newcliffe has money."

"It's a good thing," said Lundgren, "that he has me—and you. We'll see how twentieth century methods can cope with this Dark-Age disease."

Newcliffe hung up and Lundgren took possession of the phone. "As soon as my man gets back from the village I'm going to set out traps. He may be able to detect hidden metal. I've known dogs that could do it by smell in wet weather but it's worth a try."

"What's to prevent his just going away?" Doris asked. Somehow the shadows of exhaustion and fear around her eyes made her lovelier than ever.

"As I understand it he thinks he's bound by the pentagram," Foote said. At the telephone, where Lundgren evidently was listening to a different conversation with each ear, there was an energetic nod.

"In the old books, the figure is supposed to be a sure trap for demons and such if you can lure them into it. And the werewolf feels compelled to go only for the person whom he thinks is marked with it."

Lundgren said "Excuse me" and put his hand over the mouth-piece. "Only lasts seven days," he said.

"The compulsion? Then we'll have to get him before then."

"Well, maybe we'll sleep tonight anyhow," Doris said dubiously.

Lundgren hung up and rejoined them. "I didn't have much difficulty selling the good Father the idea," he said. "But he only has crucifixes enough for our groundfloor windows. By the way, he wants a picture of Jan in case he should turn up in the village."

"There are no existing photographs

of Jarmoskowski," Newcliffe said positively. "He never allowed any to be taken. It was a headache to his concert manager."

"That's understandable," Lundgren said. "With his cell radiogens under constant stimulation any picture of him would turn out over-exposed anyhow—probably a total blank. And that in turn would expose Jan."

"Well, that's too bad but it's not irreparable," Foote said. He was glad to be of some use again. He opened Newcliffe's desk and took out a sheet of stationery and a pencil. In ten minutes he had produced a head of Jarmoskowski in three-quarter profile as he had seen him at the piano that last night so many centuries ago. Lundgren studied it.

"To the life," he said. "I'll send this over by messenger. You draw well, Paul."

Bennington laughed. "You're not telling him anything he doesn't know," he said. Nevertheless, Foote thought, there was considerably less animosity in the critic's manner.

"What now?" James asked.

"We wait," Newcliffe said. "Bennington's gun was ruined by that one hand-made slug. We can't afford to have our weapons taken out of action. If I know Consolidated they'll have the machine-made jobs here tomorrow. Then we'll have some hope of getting him. Right now he's shown us he's more than a match for us in open country."

The group looked at each other. Some little understanding of what it would mean to wait through nervous days and fear-stalked nights, helpless and inactive, already showed on their faces. But there were grim necessities before which the demands of merely human feelings were forced to yield.

The conference broke up in silence.

FOR Foote, as for the rest, that night was instinct with dread, pregnant every instant with the terror of the outcry that the next moment might bring. The waning moon, greenish and sickly, reeled over the house through a sky troubled with fulgurous clouds. An in-

sistent wind made distant wolf-howls, shook from the trees soft sounds like the padding of stealthy paws, rattled windows with the scrape of claws trying for a hold.

The atmosphere of the house, hot and stuffy because of the closed windows and reeking of garlic, was stretched to an impossible tautness with waiting. In the empty room next to Foote there was the imagined coming and going of thin ghosts and the crouched expectancy of a turned-down bed—awaiting an occupant who might depress the sheets in a shocking pattern, perhaps regardless of the tiny pitiful glint of the crucifix upon the pillow. Above him, other sleepers turned restlessly, or groaned and started up from chilling nightmares.

The boundary between the real and the unreal had been let down in his mind and in the flickering shadows of the moon and the dark errands of the ghosts there was no way of making any selection. He had entered the cobwebby blackness of the borderland between the human and the demon, where nothing is ever more than half true—or half untruth.

After awhile, on the threshold of this darkness, the blasphemous voices of the hidden evil things beyond it began to seep through. The wind, abandoning the trees and gables, whispered and echoed the voices, counting the victims slowly as death stalked through the house.

One.

Two.

Three—closer now!

Four—the fourth sleeper struggled a little. Foote could hear a muffled creak of springs over his head.

Five.

Six—who was Six? Who is next? When?

Seven— Oh Lord, I'm next . . . I'm next . . . I'm next.

He curled into a ball, trembling. The wind died away and there was silence, tremendous silence. After a long while he uncurled, swearing at himself but not aloud—because he was afraid to hear his own voice. Cut that out, now, Foote, you bloody fool. You're like a kid hiding from

the goblins. You're perfectly safe. Lundgren says so.

Mamma says so.

How the heck does Lundgren know?

He's an expert. He wrote a paper. Go ahead, be a kid. Remember your childhood faith in the printed word? All right then. Go to sleep, will you?

There goes that damned counting again.

But after awhile his worn-down nerves would be denied no longer. He slept a little but fitfully, falling in his dreams through such deep pits of evil that he awoke fighting the covers and gasping for the vitiated garlic-heavy air. There was a fetid foulness in his mouth and his heart pounded. He threw off the covers and sat up, lighting a cigarette with trembling hands and trying not to see the shadows the flame threw.

He was no longer waiting for the night to end. He had forgotten that there ever was such a thing as daylight, was waiting only for the inevitable growl that would herald the last horror. Thus it was a shock almost beyond bearing to look out the window and see the brightening of dawn over the forest.

After staring incredulously at it for a moment he snubbed out his cigarette in the candlestick—which he had been carrying around the house as if it had grown to him—and collapsed. With a sigh he was instantly in deep and dreamless sleep.

WHEN he finally came to consciousness he was being shaken and Bennington's voice was in his ears. "Get up, man," the critic was saying. "No, you needn't reach for the candlestick—everything's okay thus far."

Foote grinned. "It's a pleasure to see a friendly expression on your face, Bennington," he said with a faint glow of general relief.

Bennington looked a little abashed. "I misjudged you," he admitted. "I guess it takes a crisis to bring out what's really in a man so that blunt brains like mine can see it. You don't mind if I continue to dislike your latest abstractions, I trust?"

"That's your function," Foote said cheerfully. "To be a gadfly. Now what's happened?"

"Newcliffe got up early and made the rounds of the traps. We got a good-sized rabbit out of one of them and made a stew—very good—you'll see. The other one was empty but there was blood on it and on the snow. Lundgren isn't up yet but we've saved scrapings for him."

James poked his head around the doorjamb, then came in. "Hope it cripples him," he said, dextrously snaffling a cigarette from Foote's shirt pocket. "Pardon me. All the servants have deserted us but the butler, and nobody will bring cigarettes up from the village."

"My, my," said Foote. "Everyone feels so chipper. Boy, I never thought I'd be as glad to see any sunrise as I was today's."

"If you—"

There was a sound outside. It sounded like the world's biggest tea-kettle. Something flitted through the sky, wheeled and came back.

"Cripes," Foote said, shading his eyes. "A big jet job. What's he doing here?"

The plane circled silently, jets cut. It lost flying speed and glided in over the golf course, struck and rolled at breakneck speed straight for the forest. At the last minute the pilot spun to a stop expertly.

"By heaven, I'll bet that's Newcliffe's bullets!"

They pounded downstairs. By the time they reached the front room the pilot was coming in with Newcliffe. A heavy case was slung between them.

Newcliffe pried the case open. Then he sighed. "Look at 'em," he said. "Nice, shiny brass cartridges, and dull-silver heads machined for perfect accuracy—um, yum. I could just stand here and pet them. Where are you from?"

"Croydon," said the pilot. "If you don't mind, Mr. Newcliffe, the company said I was to collect from you. That's a hundred pounds for the cartridges and five hundred for me."

"Cheap enough. Hold on, I'll write you a check."

Foote whistled. He didn't know

whether to be more awed by the transatlantic express service or the vast sum it had cost.

The pilot took the check and shortly thereafter the tea-kettle began to whistle again. From another huge wooden crate Newcliffe was handing out brand-new Brownings.

"Now let him come," he said grimly. "Don't worry about wasting shots—there's a full case of clips. As soon as you see him, blaze away like mad. Use it like a hose if you have to."

"Somebody go wake Chris," Bennington said. "He should have lessons too. Doris, go knock on his door like a good girl."

Doris nodded and went upstairs. "Now this stud here," Newcliffe said, "is the fire-control button. You put it in this position and the gun will fire one shot and reload. Put it here and you have to reload it yourself like any rifle. Put it here and it goes into automatic operation, firing every shell in the clip, one after the other."

"Thunder!" James said admiringly. "We could stand off an army."

"Wait a minute—there seem to be two missing."

"Those are all you unpacked," Bennington said.

"Yes but there were two older models of my own. I never used 'em because it didn't seem right to hunt with such a cannon. But I got 'em out last night on account of this trouble."

"Oh," Bennington said with an air of sudden enlightenment. "I thought that thing I had looked odd. I slept with one last night. I think Lundgren has another."

"Where is Lundgren? Doris should have had him up by now. Go see, Bennington, and get that gun."

"Isn't there a lot of recoil?" Foote asked.

"Sure. These are really meant to operate from bipods. Hold the gun at your hip, not your shoulder—what's *that*?"

"Bennington's voice," Foote said, suddenly tense. "Something must be wrong with Doris." The four of them clattered for the stairs.

They found Doris at Bennington's feet in front of Lundgren's open door. Evidently she had fainted without a sound. The critic was in the process of being very sick. On Lundgren's bed lay a crimson horror.

The throat was ripped out and the face and all the soft parts of the body had been eaten away. The right leg had been gnawed in one place all the way to the bone, which gleamed white and polished in the reassuring sunlight.

CHAPTER V

Second Error

FOOTE stood in the living room by the piano in the full glare of all the electric lights. He hefted the B. A. R. and surveyed the remainder of his companions, who were standing in a puzzled group before him.

"No," he said, "I don't like that. I don't want you all bunched together. String out in a line, please, in front of me, so I can see everybody."

He grinned briefly. "Got the drop on you, didn't I? Not a rifle in sight. Of course, there's the big candlestick behind you, Newcliffe, but I can shoot quicker than you can club me." His voice grew ugly. "And I will, if you make it necessary. So I would advise everybody—including the women—not to make any sudden moves."

"What is this all about, Paul?" Bennington demanded angrily. "As if things aren't bad enough!"

"You'll see directly. Now line up the way I told you. *Quick!*" He moved the gun suggestively. "And remember what I said about sudden moves. It may be dark outside but I didn't turn on all the lights for nothing."

Quietly the line formed and the eyes that looked at Foote were narrowed with suspicion of madness—or worse.

"Good. Now we can talk comfortably. You see, after what happened to Chris I'm not taking any chances. That was

partly his fault and partly mine. But the gods allow no one to err twice in matters like this. He paid a ghastly price for his second error—a price I don't intend to pay or to see anyone else here pay."

"Would you honor us with an explanation of this error?" Newcliffe said icily.

"Yes. I don't blame you for being angry, Tom, since I'm your guest. But you see I'm forced to treat you all alike for the moment. I was fond of Lundgren."

There was silence for a moment, then a thin indrawing of breath from Bennington. "You were fond—my Lord!" he whispered raggedly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that Lundgren was not killed by Jarmoskowski," Foote said coldly and deliberately. "He was killed by someone else. Another werewolf. *One who is standing before me at this moment.*"

A concerted gasp went up.

"Surprised? But it's true. The error for which Chris paid so dearly, which I made too, was this—we forgot to examine everybody for injuries after the encounter with Jan. We forgot one of the cardinal laws of lycanthropy.

"A man who survives being bitten by a werewolf himself becomes a werewolf. That's how the disease is passed on. The pinearin in the saliva gets into the blood-stream, stimulates the victim's own pineal gland and—"

"But nobody was bitten, Paul," Doris said in a reasonable voice.

"Somebody was, lightly. None of you but Chris and myself could know about the bite-infection. Evidently somebody got a few small scratches, didn't think them worth mentioning, put iodine on them and forgot them—until it was too late."

There were slow movements in the line—heads turning surreptitiously, eyes glancing nervously at persons to left and right.

"Once the attack occurred," Foote said relentlessly, "Chris was the logical first victim. The expert, hence the most dangerous enemy. I wish I had thought of this before lunch. I might have seen

which one of you was uninterested in his lunch. In any event Chris' safeguards against letting Jarmoskowski in also keep you from getting out. You won't leave this room ever again."

He gritted his teeth and brought himself back into control. "All right," he said. "This is the showdown. Everybody hold up both hands in plain view."

Almost instantly there was a ravening wolf in the room.

Only Foote, who could see at a glance the order of the people in the line, knew who it was. The frightful tragedy of it struck him such a blow that the gun dropped nervelessly from his hands. He wept convulsively. The monster lunged for his throat like a reddish projectile.

Newcliffe's hand darted back, grasped the candlestick. He leapt forward in a swift, catlike motion and brought it down across the werewolf's side. Ribs burst with a horrible splintering sound. The beast spun, snarling with agony. Newcliffe hit it again across the backbone. It fell, screaming, fangs slashing the air.

Three times, with concentrated viciousness, Newcliffe struck at its head. Then it cried out once in an almost-familiar voice—and died.

Slowly the cells of its body groped back toward their natural positions. The awful crawling metamorphosis was never completed. But the hairy-haunched thing with the crushed skull which sprawled at Newcliffe's feet was recognizable.

It had been Caroline Newcliffe.

There was a frozen tableau of wax figures in the yellow lamplight. Tears coursed along Foote's palms, dropped from under them, fell silently to the carpet. After awhile he dropped his hands. Bennington's face was grey with illness but rigidly expressionless like a granite statue. James' back was against the wall. He watched the anomalous corpse as if waiting for some new movement.

As for Newcliffe he had no expression at all. He merely stood where he was, the bloody candlestick held loosely in a limp hand.

His eyes were quite empty.

AFTER a moment Doris walked over to Newcliffe and touched his shoulder compassionately. The contact seemed to let something out of him. He shrank visibly into himself, shoulders slumping, his whole body withering visibly into a dry husk.

The candlestick thumped against the floor, rocked wildly on its base, toppled across the body. As it struck Foote's cigarette butt, which had somehow remained in it all day, tumbled out and rolled crazily along the carpet.

"Tom," Doris said softly. "Come away now. There's nothing you can do."

"Blood," he said emptily. "She had a cut. On her hand. Handled the scrapings from the trap—my trap. I did it. Just a breadknife cut from making canapés. I did it."

"No you didn't, Tom. Let's get some rest." She took his hand. He followed her obediently, stumbling a little as his blood-spattered shoes scuffed over the thick rug, his breath expelling from his lungs with a soft whisper. The two disappeared up the stairs.

Bennington bolted for the kitchen sink.

Foote sat down on the piano bench, his worn face taut with dried tears, and picked at the dusty keys. The lightly-struck notes aroused James. He crossed the room and looked down at Foote.

"You did well," the novelist said shakily. "Don't condemn yourself, Paul."

Foote nodded. He felt—nothing. Nothing at all.

"The body?"

"Yes. I suppose so." He got up from the bench. Together they carried the tragic corpse out through the house to the greenhouse.

"We should leave her here," Foote said with a faint return of his old irony. "Here's where the wolfbane bloomed and started the whole business."

"Poetic justice, I suppose," James said. "But I don't think it's wise. Tom has a toolshed at the other end that isn't steam heated. It should be cold enough."

Gently they placed the body on the cement floor, laying some gunny-sacks

under it. "In the morning," Foote said, "we can have someone come for her."

"How about legal trouble?" James said, frowning. "Here's a woman whose skull has been crushed with a blunt instrument—"

"I think I can get Lundgren's priest to help us there," Foote said somberly. "They have some authority to make death certificates in this state. Besides, James—is that a woman? Inarguably it isn't Caroline."

James looked sidewise at the hairy, contorted haunches. "Yes. It's—legally it's nothing. I see your point."

Together they went back into the house. "Jarmoskowski?" James said.

"Not tonight. We're all too tired and sick. And we do seem to be safe enough in here. Chris saw to that."

Whatever James had to say in reply was lost in the roar of an automatic rifle somewhere over their heads, exhausting its shots in a quick stream. After a moment there was another burst of ten. Footsteps echoed. Then Bennington came bouncing down the stairs.

"Watch out tonight," he panted. "He's around. I saw him come out of the woods in wolf form. I emptied the clip but missed and he went back again. I sprayed another ten rounds around where I saw him go in but I don't think I hit him."

"Where were you shooting from?"

"The top of the tower." His face was very grim. "Went up for a last look around and there he was. I hope he comes tonight. I want to be the one who kills him."

"How is Tom?"

"Bad. Doesn't seem to know where he is or what he's doing. Well, goodnight. Keep your eyes peeled."

James nodded and followed him upstairs. Foote remained in the empty room a few minutes longer, looking thoughtfully at the splotch of blood on the priceless Persian carpet. Then he felt of his face and throat, looked at his hands, arms and legs, inside his shirt. Not so much as a scratch—Tom had seen to that.

So hard not to hate these afflicted peo-

ple, so impossible to remember that lycanthropy was a disease like any other! Caroline, like the man in *The Red Laugh*, had been noble-hearted and gentle and had wished no one evil. Yet—

Maybe God is on the side of the werewolves.

The blasphemy of an exhausted mind. Yet he could not put it from him. Suppose Jarmoskowski should conquer his compulsion and lie out of sight until the seven days were over. Then he could disappear. It was a big country. It would not be necessary for him to kill all his victims—just those he actually needed for food. But he could nip a good many. Every other one, say.

And from wherever he lived the circle of lycanthropy would grow and widen and engulf—

Maybe God had decided that proper humans had made a mess of running the world, had decided to give the *nosferatu*, the undead, a chance at it. Perhaps the human race was on the threshold of that darkness into which he had looked throughout last night.

He ground his teeth and made an exasperated noise. Shock and exhaustion would drive him as crazy as Newcliffe if he kept this up.

He went around the room, making sure that all the windows were tightly closed and the crucifixes in place, turning out the lights as he went. The garlic was getting rancid—it smelled like mercaptan—but he was too tired to replace it. He clicked out the last light, picked up the candlestick and went out into the hall.

As he passed Doris' room, he noticed that the door was ajar. Inside two voices murmured. Remembering what he had heard before he stopped to eavesdrop.

IT was years later that Foote found out exactly what had happened at the very beginning. Doris, physically exhausted by the hideous events of the day, emotionally drained by tending the childlike Newcliffe, feeding him from a spoon and seeing him into bed, had fallen asleep almost immediately.

It was a sleep dreamless except for a

vague, dull undercurrent of despair. When the light tapping against the window-panes finally reached her consciousness she had no idea how long she had slumbered.

She struggled to a sitting position and forced her eyelids up. Across the room the moonlight, gleaming in patches against the rotting snow outside, glared through the window. Silhouetted against it was a tall human figure. She could not see its face but there was no mistaking the red glint of the eyes. She clutched for the rifle and brought it awkwardly into position.

Jarmoskowski did not dodge. He moved his arms out a little way away from his body, palms forward in a gesture that looked almost supplicating, and waited. Indecisively she lowered the gun again. Was he inviting death?

As she lowered the weapon she saw that the stud was in the continuous-fire position and carefully she shifted it to *repeat*. She was afraid of the recoil Newcliffe had mentioned, felt surer of her target if she could throw one shot at a time at it.

Jarmoskowski tapped again and motioned with his finger. Reasoning that he would come in if he were able, she took time out to get into her housecoat. Then, holding her finger against the trigger, she went to the window. It was closed tightly and a crucifix, suspended from a silk thread, hung exactly in the center of it. She checked it, and then opened one of the small panes directly above Jarmoskowski's head.

"Hello, Doris," he said softly.

"Hello." She was more uncertain than afraid. Was this actually happening or just the recurrent nightmare? "What do you want? I should shoot you. Can you tell me why I shouldn't?"

"Yes I can. Otherwise I wouldn't have risked exposing myself. That's a nasty-looking weapon."

"There are ten silver bullets in it."

"I know it. I've seen Brownings before. I would be a good target for you too, so I have no hope of escape—my nostrils are full of rosemary." He smiled ruefully. "And Lundgren and Caroline are

dead and I am responsible. I deserve to die. That is why I am here."

"You'll get your wish, Jan," she said. "You have some other reason, I know. I will back my wits against yours. I want to ask you questions."

"Ask."

"You have your evening clothes on. Paul said they changed with you. How is that possible?"

"But a wolf has clothes," Jarmoskowski said. "He is not naked like a man. And surely Chris must have spoken of the effect of the pineal upon the cell radiogens. These little bodies act upon any organic matter, including wool or cotton. When I change my clothes change with me. I can hardly say how, for it is in the blood, like musicianship. Either you can or you can't. But they change."

His voice took on a darkly somber tone. "Lundgren was right throughout. This werewolfery is now nothing but a disease. It is not pro-survival. Long ago there must have been a number of mutations which brought the pineal gland into use.

"None of them survived but the werewolves and these are dying. Someday the pineal will come into better use and all men will be able to modify their forms without this terrible madness as a penalty. For us, the lycanthropes, the failures, nothing is left.

"It is not good for a man to wander from country to country, knowing that he is a monster to his fellow-men and cursed eternally by his God—if he can claim a God. I went through Europe, playing the piano and giving pleasure, meeting people, making friends—and always, sooner or later, there were whisperings, and strange looks and dawning horror.

"And whether I was hunted down for the beast I was or whether there was merely a vague gradually-growing revulsion, they drove me out. Hatred, silver bullets, crucifixes—they are all the same in the end.

"Sometimes, I could spend several months without incident in some one place and my life would take on a veneer of normality. I could attend to my music

and have people about me that I liked and be—human. Then the wolfbane bloomed and the pollen freighted the air and when the moon shone down on that flower my blood surged with the thing I have within me.

"And then I made apologies to my friends and went north to Sweden, where Lundgren was and where spring was much later. I loved him and I think he missed the truth about me until night before last. I was careful.

"Once or twice I did *not* go North and then the people who had been my friends would be hammering silver behind my back and waiting for me in dark corners. After years of this few places in Europe would have me. With my reputation as a musician spread darker rumors.

"Towns I had never visited closed their gates to me without a word. Concert halls were booked up too many months in advance for me to use them, inns and hotels were filled indefinitely, people were too busy to talk to me, to listen to my playing, to write me any letters.

"I have been in love. That—I cannot describe.

"And then I came to this country. Here no one believes in the werewolf. I sought scientific help—not from Lundgren, because I was afraid I should do him some harm. But here I thought someone would know enough to deal with what I had become.

"It was not so. The primitive hatred of my kind lies at the heart of the human as it lies at the heart of the dog. There was no help for me.

"I am here to ask for an end to it."

Slow tears rolled over Doris' cheeks. The voice faded away indefinitely. It did not seem to end at all but rather to retreat into some limbo where men could not hear it. Jarmoskowski stood silently in the moonlight, his eyes burning bloodily, a somber sullen scarlet.

Doris said, "Jan—Jan, I am sorry, I am so sorry. What can I do?"

"Shoot."

"I—can't!"

"Please, Doris."

The girl was crying uncontrollably. "Jan, don't. I can't. You know I can't. Go away, *please* go away."

Jarmoskowski said, "Then come with me, Doris. Open the window and come with me."

"Where?"

"Does it matter? You have denied me the death I ask. Would you deny me this last desperate love, would you deny your own love, your own last and deepest desire? It is too late now, too late for you to pretend revulsion. Come with me."

He held out his hands.

"Say goodbye," he said. "Goodbye to these self-righteous humans. I will give you of my blood and we will range the world, wild and uncontrollable, the last of our race. They will remember us, I promise you."

"Jan—"

"I am here. Come now."

Like a somnambulist she swung the panes out. Jarmoskowski did not move but looked first at her, then at the crucifix. She lifted one end of the thread and let the little thing tinkle to the floor.

"After us there shall be no darkness comparable to our darkness," Jarmoskowski said. "Let them rest—let the world rest."

He sprang into the room with so sudden, so feral a motion that he seemed hardly to have moved at all. From the doorway the automatic rifle yammered with demoniac ferocity. The impact of the slugs hurled Jarmoskowski back against the wall. Foote lowered the smoking muzzle and took one step into the room.

"Too late, Jan," he said stonily.

Doris wailed like a little girl awakened from a dream. Jarmoskowski's lips moved but there was not enough left of his lungs. The effort to speak brought a bloody froth to his mouth. He stood for an instant, stretched out a hand toward the girl. Then the long fingers clenched convulsively and the long body folded.

He smiled, put aside that last of all his purposes and died.

Novelets by Raymond F. Jones, Cleve Cartmill and Raymond Gallun Next Issue!

Rebellion Flares When Fantasy is Banned in 2229!

The masked ball went
merrily on



Carnival of Madness

By RAY BRADBURY

DURING the whole of a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades

of evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. . . ."

Mr. William Stendahl paused in his quotation. There, upon a low black hill, stood the House, its cornerstone bearing the inscription: 2249 A.D.

Mr. Bigelow, the architect said, "It's

completed. Here's the key, Mr. Stendahl."

The two men stood together, silently, in the quiet autumn afternoon. Blueprints rustled on the raven grass at their feet.

"The House of Usher," said Mr. Stendahl, with pleasure. "Planned, built, bought, paid for. Wouldn't Mr. Poe be delighted?"

Mr. Bigelow squinted. "Is it everything you wanted, sir?"

"Yes!"

"Is its color right? Is it *desolate* and *terrible*?"

"Very desolate, very terrible!"

"The walls are—bleak?"

"Amazingly so!"

"The tarn, is it 'black and lurid' enough?"

"Most incredibly black and lurid."

"And the sedge—we've dyed it, you know—is it the proper gray and ebony?"

"Hideous!"

Mr. Bigelow consulted his architectural plans. From these he quoted in part: "Does the whole structure cause an 'iciness, a sickening of the heart, a dreariness of thought?' the House, the lake, the land, Mr. Stendahl?"

"Mr. Bigelow, your hand! Congratulations! It's worth every penny. My word, it's *beautiful*!"

"Thank you. I had to work in total ignorance. A puzzling job. You notice, it's always twilight here, this land, always October, barren, sterile, dead. It took a bit of doing. We killed everything! Ten thousand tons of DDT. Not a snake, frog, fly or anything left! Twilight, always, Mr. Stendahl, I'm proud of that. There are machines, hidden, which blot out the sun. It's always properly 'dreary'."

Stendahl drank it in, the dreariness, the oppression, the fetid vapors, the whole 'atmosphere', so delicately contrived and fitted. And that House! That crumbling horror, that evil lake, the fungi, the extensive decay! Plastic or otherwise, who could guess?

He looked at the autumn sky. Somewhere, above, beyond, far off, was a sun. Somewhere it was the month of May, a

yellow month with a blue sky. Somewhere above, the passenger rockets burned east and west across the continent in a modern land. The sound of their screaming passage was muffled and killed by this dim, sound-proofed world, this ancient autumn world.

"Now that my job's done," said Mr. Bigelow, uneasily, "I feel free to ask what you're going to do with all this?"

"With Usher? Haven't you guessed?"

"No."

"Does the name Usher mean nothing to you?"

"Nothing."

"Well, what about *this* name: Edgar Allan Poe?"

Mr. Bigelow shook his head.

"Of course." Stendahl snorted delicately, a combination of dismay and contempt. "How could I expect you to know blessed Mr. Poe? He died a long while ago, before Lincoln. That's four centuries back. All of his books were burned in The Great Fire."

"Ah," said Mr. Bigelow, wisely, "One of *those*!"

"Yes, one of those, Bigelow. He and Lovecraft and Hawthorne and Ambrose Bierce and all the tales of terror and fantasy and horror and, for that matter, tales of the future, were burned. Heartlessly. They passed a law. Oh, it started very small. Centuries ago it was a grain of sand. They began by controlling books and, of course, films, one way or another, one group or another, political bias, religious prejudice, union pressures, there was always a minority afraid of something, and a great majority afraid of the dark, afraid of the future, afraid of the past, afraid of the present, afraid of themselves and shadows of themselves."

"I see."

"Afraid of the word politics (which eventually became a synonym for communism among the more reactionary elements, so I hear, and it was worth your life to use the word!), and with a screw tightened here, a bolt fastened there, a push, a pull, a yank, Art and Literature were soon like a great twine of taffy strung all about,

being twisted in braids and tied in knots, and thrown in all directions, until there was no more resiliency and no more savor to it. Then the film cameras chopped short and the theatres turned dark, and the print presses trickled down from a great Niagara of reading matter to a mere innocuous dripping of 'pure' material. Oh, the word 'escape' was radical, too, I tell you!"

"Was it?"

"It was! Every man, they said, must face reality. Must face the Here and Now! Everything that was *not so* must go. All the beautiful literary lies and flights of fancy must be shot in mid-air! So, they lined them up against a library wall one Sunday morning twenty years ago, in 2229, they lined them up, Saint Nicholas and the Headless Horseman and Snow White and Rumpelstiltskin and Mother Goose, oh, what a wailing! and shot them down, and burned the paper castles and the fairy frogs and old kings and the people who lived happily ever after (for, of course, it was a fact that *nobody* lived happily ever after!) and Once Upon A Time became No More!

"And they spread the ashes of the Phantom Rickshaw with the rubble of The Land of Oz, they fileted the bones of Glinda the Good and Ozma and shattered Polychrome in a spectroscope and served Jack Pumpkinhead with meringue at the Biologist's Ball! The Beanstalk died in a bramble of red tape! Sleeping Beauty awoke at the kiss of a scientist and expired at the fatal puncture of his syringe. And they made Alice drink something from a bottle which reduced her to a size where she could no longer cry Curiouser and Curiouser, and they gave the Looking Glass one hammer blow to crash it and every Red King and Oyster away!"

HE clenched his fists. Lord, how immediate it was! His face was red, and he was gasping for breath.

As for Mr. Bigelow, he was astounded at this long explosion. He blinked at Mr. Stendahl and at last said, "Sorry. I don't know what you're talking about.

Names, just names to me. From what I hear, the Burning was a good thing."

"Get out!" screamed Mr. Stendahl. "Get the blazes out! You've got your money, you've done your job, now let me alone, you idiot!"

Mr. Bigelow summoned his workers and went away.

Mr. Stendahl stood alone before his House.

"Listen here," he said to the unseen rockets, flying over. "I'm going to show you all. I'm going to teach you a fine lesson for what you did to Mr. Poe. As of this day, beware. The House of Usher is open for business!"

He pushed a fist at the sky.

* * * * *

The rocket landed. A man stepped out. He looked at the House and his gray eyes were displeased and vexed. He strode across the moat and confronted the small man there.

"Your name Stendahl?"

"I'm Mr. Stendahl, yes," said the small man.

"I'm Garrett, Investigator of Moral Climates." The irritated man waved a card at the House. "Suppose you tell me about this place, Mr. Stendahl."

"Very well. It's a castle. A haunted castle, if you like."

"I don't like, Mr. Stendahl, I *don't* like. The sound of that word 'haunted.'"

"Simple enough. In this year of Our Lord 2249 I have built a mechanical sanctuary. In it copper bats fly on electronic beams, brass rats scuttle in plastic cellars, robot skeletons dance; robot vampires, harlequins, wolves and white phantoms, compounded of chemical and ingenuity, live here."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Garrett, smiling quietly. "I'm afraid we're going to have to tear your place down."

"I knew you'd come out as soon as you discovered what went on."

"I'd have come sooner, but we at Moral Climates wanted to be sure of your intentions before we moved in. We can have the Dismantlers and Burning Crew here by supper. By midnight, your

place will be razed to the cellar. Mr. Stendahl, I consider you somewhat of a fool, sir. Spending hard-earned money on a Folly. Why, it must have cost you three million dollars."

"Four million! But, Mr. Garrett, I inherited twenty-five million when very young. I can afford to throw it about. Seems a dreadful shame, though, to have the House finished only an hour and have you race out with your Dismantlers. Couldn't you possibly let me play with my Toy for just, well, twenty four hours?"

"You know the law. Strict to the letter. No books, no houses, nothing to be produced which in any way suggests ghosts, vampires, fairies, or any creatures of the imagination."

"You'll be burning Babbitts net!"

"You've caused us a lot of trouble, Mr. Stendahl. It's in the record. Twenty years ago. You and your library."

"Yes, me and my library. And a few others like me. Oh, Poe's been forgotten for many centuries, and Oz, and the other creatures. But I had *my* little cache. We had our libraries, a few private citizens, until you sent your men around with torches and incinerators and tore my fifty thousand books up and burned them. Just as you put a stake through the heart of Hallowe'en and told your film producers that if they made anything at all they would have to make and re-make Ernest Hemingway. My God, how many *times* have I seen *For Whom the Bell Tolls*! Thirty different versions! All realistic. Oh, realism! Oh, *here, oh, now, oh hell!*"

"It doesn't pay to be better!"

"Mr. Garrett, you must turn in a full report, mustn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then, for curiosity's sake, you'd better come in and look around. It'll take only a minute."

"All right. Lead the way. And no tricks. I've got a gun with me."

The door to the House of Usher creaked wide. A moist wind issued forth. There was an immense sighing and moaning, like a subterranean bellows breathing in the lost catacombs.

A rat pranced across the floorstones. Garrett, crying out, gave it a kick. It fell over, the rat did, and from its nylon fur streamed an incredible horde of metal fleas.

"Amazing!" Garrett bent to see.

An old witch sat in a niche, quivering her wax hands over some orange and blue tarot cards. She jerked her head and hissed through her toothless mouth at Garrett, tapping her greasy cards.

"Death!" she cried.

"Now *that's* the sort of thing I mean," said Garrett. "Deplorable!"

"I'll let you burn her personally."

"Will you, *really*?" Garrett was pleased. Then he frowned. "I must say you're taking this all too well."

"It was enough just to be able to create this place. To be able to say I did it. To say I nurtured a medieval atmosphere in a modern, incredulous world."

"I've a somewhat reluctant admiration for your genius myself, sir." Garrett watched a mist drift by, whispering and whispering, shaped like a beautiful and nebulous woman. Down a moist corridor a machine whirled. Like the stuff from a cotton candy centrifuge, mists sprang up and floated, murmuring, in the silent halls.

An ape appeared out of nowhere.

"Hold on!" cried Garrett.

"Don't be afraid." Stendahl tapped the animal's black chest. "A robot. Copper skeleton and all, like the witch. See." He stroked the fur and under it metal tubing came to light.

"Yes." Garrett put out a timid hand to pet the thing. "But why, Mr. Stendahl, why all *this*? What obsessed you?"

"Bureaucracy, Mr. Garrett. But I haven't time to explain. The Government will discover soon enough." He nodded to the ape. "All right. *Now.*"

The ape killed Mr. Garrett.

PIKES looked up from the table.

"Are we almost ready, Pikes?" Stendahl asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You've done a splendid job."

"Well, I'm paid for it, Mr. Stendahl,"

said Pikes, softly, as he lifted the plastic eyelid of the robot and inserted the glass eyeball to fasten the rubberoid muscles neatly. "There."

"The spitting image of Mr. Garrett."

"What do we do with *him*?" Pikes nodded at the slab where the real Mr. Garrett lay dead.

"Better burn him, Pikes. We wouldn't want *two* Mr. Garretts, would we?"

Pikes wheeled Mr. Garrett to the brick incinerator. "Good-by." He pushed Mr. Garrett in and slammed the door.

Stendahl confronted the robot Garrett. "You have your orders, Garrett?"

"Yes, sir." The robot sat up. "I'm to return to Moral Climates. I'll file a complementary report. Delay action for at least forty-eight hours. Say I'm investigating more fully."

"Right, Garrett. Good-by."

The robot hurried out to Garrett's rocket, got in, and flew away.

Stendahl turned. "Now, Pikes, we send the remainder of the Invitations for tonight. I think we'll have a jolly time, don't you?"

"Considering we waited twenty years, quite jolly!"

They winked at each other.

* * * * *

Seven o'clock. Stendahl studied his watch. Almost time. He twirled the sherry glass in his hand. He sat quietly. Above him, among the oaken beams, the bats, their delicate copper bodies hidden under rubber flesh, blinked at him and shrieked. He raised his glass to them. "To our success." Then he leaned back, closed his eyes and considered the entire affair. How he would *savor* this in his old age. This paying back of the antiseptic government for their literary terrors and conflagrations. Oh, how the anger and hatred had grown in him through the years. Oh, how the plan had taken a slow shape in his numbed mind, until that day, three years ago, when he had met Pikes.

Ah, yes, Pikes. Pikes, with the bitterness in him as deep as a black, charred well of green acid. Who was Pikes? Only the greatest of them all! Pikes, the

man of ten thousand faces, a fury, a smoke, a blue fog, a white rain, a bat, a gargoyle, a monster, that was Pikes! A whisper, a scream, a terror, a witch, a puppet, all things was Pikes! Better than Lon Chaney, the father?

Stendahl ruminated. Night after night he had watched Chaney in the old old films. Yes, better than Chaney. Better than that other ancient mummer? What was his name? Karloff? Far better! Lugosi? The comparison was odious! No, there was only one Pikes, and he was a man stripped of his fantasies, now, no place on earth to go, no one to show off to. Forbidden even to perform for himself, before a mirror!

Poor impossible, defeated Pikes! How must it have felt, Pikes, the night they seized your films, like entrails yanked from the camera, out of your guts, clutching them in rolls and wads to stuff them up a stove to burn away! Did it feel as bad as having some fifty thousand books annihilated with no recompense? Yes. Yes. Stendahl felt his hands grow cold with the senseless anger. So what more natural than they would one day talk over endless coffee-pots into innumerable midnights, and out of all the talk and the bitter brewings would come—the House of Usher.

A great church bell rang. The guests were arriving.

Smiling, he went to greet them.

* * * * *

Full grown without memory the robots waited. In green silks the color of forest pools, in silks the color of frog and fern they waited. In yellow hair the color of the sun and sand, the robots waited. Oiled, with tube-bones cut from bronze and sunk in gelatin, the robots lay. In coffins for the not dead and not alive, in planked boxes, the metronomes waited to be set in motion. There was a smell of lubrication and lathed brass.

There was a silence of the tombyard. Sexed but sexless, the robots. Named but unnamed, and borrowing from humans everything but humanity, the robots stared at the nailed lids of their labeled F. O. B. boxes, in a death that

was not even a death for there had never been a life. And now there was a vast screaming of yanked nails. Now there was a lifting of lids. Now there were shadows on the boxes, and the pressure of a hand squirting oil from a can. Now one clock was set in motion, a faint ticking. Now another and another, until this was an immense clock shop, purring. The marble eyes rolled wide their rubber lids. The nostrils winked.

The robots, clothed in hair of ape and white rabbit arose, Tweedledum following Tweedledee, Mock-Turtle, Dormouse, drowned bodies from the sea compounded of salt and white-weed, swaying; hung, blue-throated men with turned up, clam-flesh eyes, and creatures of ice and burning tinsel, loam-dwarves and pepper-elves, Tik-Tok, Ruggedo, Saint Nicholas with a self-made snow flurry blowing on before him, Bluebeard with whiskers like acetylene flame, and sulphur clouds from which green fire snouts protruded, and, in scaly and gigantic serpentine, a dragon, with a furnace in its belly, reeled out the door with a scream, a tick, a bellow, a silence, a rush, a wind.

Ten thousand lids fell back. The clock shop moved out into Usher. The night was enchanted.

A WARM breeze came over the land. The guest rockets, burning the sky and turning the weather from autumn to spring, arrived.

The men stepped out in evening clothes and the women stepped out after them, their hair coiled up in elaborate detail.

"So *that's* Usher!"

"But where's the door?"

At this moment, Stendahl appeared. The women laughed and chattered. Mr. Stendahl raised a hand to quiet them. Turning, he looked up to a high castle window and called:

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair."

And from above, a beautiful maiden leaned out upon the night wind and let down her golden hair. And the hair

twined and blew and became a ladder upon which the guests might ascend, laughing, into the House.

What eminent sociologists! What clever psychologists! What tremendously important politicians, bacteriologists, and neurologists! There they stood, within the dank walls.

"Welcome, all of you!"

Mr. Tryon, Mr. Owen, Mr. Dunne, Mr. Lang, Mr. Steffens, Mr. Fletcher, and a double-dozen more.

"Come in, come in!"

Miss Gibbs, Miss Pope, Miss Churchill, Miss Blunt, Miss Drummond, and a score of other women, glittering.

Eminent, eminent people, one and all, members of the Society for the Prevention of Fantasy, advocates of the banishment of Hallowe'en and Guy Fawkes, killers of bats, burners of books, bearers of torches; good clean citizens, every one! And what is more, friends! Yes, carefully, carefully, he had met and befriended each, in the last year!

"Welcome to the vasty halls of Death!" he cried.

"Hello, Stendahl, what is all this?"

"You'll see. Everyone off with your clothes. You'll find booths to one side there. Change into costumes you find there. Men on this side, women on that."

The people stood uneasily about.

"I don't know if we should stay," said Miss Pope. "I don't like the looks of this. It verges on—blasphemy"

"Nonsense, a costume ball!"

"This seems quite illegal," said Mr. Steffens, sniffing about.

"Oh, come off it," said Stendahl, laughing. "Enjoy yourselves. Tomorrow, it'll be a ruin. Get in there, all of you. The booths!"

The House blazed with life and color, harlequins rang by with belled caps and white mice danced miniature quadrilles to the music of dwarves who tickled tiny fiddles with tiny bows, and flaps rippled from scorched beams while bats flew in clouds about the gargoyle turrets and the gargoyles spouted down red wine from their mouths, cool and wild and foaming. There was a creek which wan-

dered through the seven rooms of the masked ball, and the guests were bade to sip of it, and found it to be sherry.

The guests poured forth from the booths transformed from one age into another, their faces covered with dominoes, the very act of putting on a mask revoking all their licenses to pick and quarrel with fantasy and horror. The women swept about in red gowns, laughing.

The men danced them attendance. And on the walls were shadows with no people to throw them, and here or there were mirrors in which no image showed.

"All of us vampires!" laughed Mr. Fletcher. "Dead!"

There were seven rooms, each a different color, one blue, one purple, one green, one orange, another white, the sixth violet, and the seventh shrouded in black velvet. And in the black room was an ebony clock which struck the hour loud. And through these rooms the guests ran, drunk at last, among the robot fantasies, amid the Dormice and Mad Hatters, the trolls and giants, the Black Cats and White Queens, and under their dancing feet the floor gave off the massive pumping beat of a hidden telltale heart.

"Mr. Stendahl!"

A whisper.

"Mr. Stendahl!"

A MONSTER with the face of death stood at his elbow. It was Pikes. "I must see you alone."

"What is it?"

"Here." Pikes held out a skeleton hand. In it were a few half-melted, charred wheels, nuts, cogs, bolts.

Stendahl looked at them for a long moment. Then he drew Pikes into a corridor.

"Garrett?" he whispered.

Pikes nodded. "He sent a robot in his place. Cleaning out the incinerator a moment ago, I found these."

They both stared at the fateful cogs for a time.

"This means the police will be here any minute," said Pikes. "Our plan will be ruined."

"I don't know." Stendahl glanced in at the whirling yellow and blue and orange people. The music swept through the misting halls. "I should have guessed Garrett wouldn't be fool enough to come in person. But wait!"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. There's nothing the matter. Garrett sent a robot to us. Well, we sent one back. Unless he checks closely he won't notice the switch."

"Of course!"

"Next time, he'll come *himself*. Now that he thinks it's safe. Why, he might be at the door any minute, in *person*! More wine, Pikes!"

The great bell rang.

"There he is now, I'll bet you. Go let Mr. Garrett in."

Rapunzel let down her golden hair.

"Mr. Stendahl?"

"Mr. Garrett. The *real* Mr. Garrett?"

"The same." Garrett eyed the dank walls and the whirling people. "I thought I'd better come see for myself. You can't depend on robots. Other people's robots, especially. I also took the precaution of summoning the Dismantlers. They'll be here in one hour to knock the props out from under this horrible place."

Stendahl bowed. "Thanks for telling me." He waved his hand. "In the meantime, you might as well enjoy this. A little wine?"

"No thank you. What's going on? How low can a man sink?"

"See for yourself, Mr. Garrett."

"Murder," said Garrett.

"Murder most foul," said Stendahl.

A woman screamed. Miss Pope ran up, her face the color of a cheese. "The most horrid thing just happened! I saw Miss Blunt strangled by an ape and stuffed up a chimney!"

They looked and saw the long yellow hair trailing down from the flue. Garrett cried out.

"Horrid!" sobbed Miss Pope, and then ceased crying. She blinked and turned. "Miss Blunt!"

"Yes," said Miss Blunt, standing there.

"But I just saw you crammed up the flue!"

"No," laughed Miss Blunt. "A robot of myself. A clever facsimile!"

"But, but—"

"Don't cry, darling. I'm quite all right. Let me look at myself. Well, so there I *am*! Up the chimney, Like you said. Isn't that funny?"

Miss Blunt walked away, laughing softly.

"Have a drink, Garrett?"

"I believe I will. That unnerved me. My God, what a place. This *does* deserve tearing down. For a moment there . . ."

Garrett drank.

ANOTHER scream. Mr. Steffens, borne upon the shoulders of four white rabbits, was carried down a flight of stairs which magically appeared in the floor. Into a pit went Mr. Steffens, where, bound and tied, he was left to face the advancing razor steel of a great pendulum which now swept down, coming closer and closer to his outraged body.

"Is that *me* down there?" said Mr. Steffens, appearing at Garrett's elbow. He bent over the pit. "How strange, how odd, to see yourself die."

The pendulum made a final stroke.

"How realistic," said Mr. Steffens, turning away.

"Another drink, Mr. Garrett?"

"Yes, please."

"It won't be long. The Dismantlers will be here."

"Thank God!"

And for a third time, a scream.

"What now?" said Garrett, apprehensively.

"It's my turn," said Miss Drummond.

"Look."

And a second Miss Drummond, shrieking, was nailed into a coffin and thrust into the raw earth under the floor.

"Why I remember *that*," gasped the Investigator of Moral Climates. "From the old forbidden books. The Premature Burial. And the others. The Pit, the Pendulum, and the ape; the chimney, the Murders in the Rue Morgue. In a book I burned, yes!"

"Another drink, Garrett. Here, hold your glass steady."

"My Lord, you *have* an imagination, haven't you?"

They stood and watched five others die, one in the mouth of a dragon, the others thrown off into the black tarn, sinking and vanishing.

"Would you like to see what we have planned for you?" asked Stendahl.

"Certainly," said Garrett. "What's the difference? We'll blow the whole thing up, anyway. You're nasty."

"Come along then. This way."

And he led Garrett down into the floor, through numerous passages and down again upon spiral stairs into the earth, into the catacombs.

"What do you want to show me down here?" said Garrett.

"Yourself killed."

"A duplicate?"

"Yes. And also something else."

"What?"

"The Amontillado," said Stendahl, going ahead with a blazing lantern which he held high. Skeletons froze half out of coffin lids. Garrett held his hand to his nose, face disgusted.

"The *what*?"

"Haven't you ever heard of the Amontillado?"

"No!"

"Don't you recognize this?" Stendahl pointed to a cell.

"Should I?"

"Or this?" Stendahl produced a trowel from under his cape, smiling.

"What's that thing?"

"Come," said Stendahl.

They stepped into the cell. In the dark, Stendahl affixed the chains to the half-drunken man.

"For God's sake, what are you *doing*?" shouted Garrett, rattling about.

"I'm being ironic. Don't interrupt a man in the midst of being ironic. It's not polite. There!"

"You've locked me in chains!"

"So I have."

"What are you going to do?"

"Leave you here."

"You're joking."

"A very good joke."

"Where's my duplicate? Don't we see him killed?"

"There is no duplicate."

"But, the *others*!"

"The others are dead. The ones you saw killed were the real people. The duplicates, the robots, stood by and watched." Garrett said nothing.

"Now you're supposed to say 'For the love of God, Montresor!'" said Stendahl.

"And I will reply 'Yes, for the love of God.' Won't you say it? Come on. *Say it.*"

"You fool."

"Must I coax you? Say it. Say 'for the love of God, Montresor!'"

"I won't, you idiot. Get me out of here." He was sober now.

"Here. Put this on." Stendahl tossed in something that belled and rang.

"What is it?"

"A cap and bells. Put it on and I might let you out."

"Stendahl!"

"Put it on, I said!"

Garrett obeyed. The bells tinkled.

"Don't you have a feeling that this has all happened before?" inquired Stendahl, setting to work with trowel and mortar and brick now.

"What're you doing?"

"Walling you in. Here's one row Here's another."

"You're insane!"

"I won't argue that point."

"You'll be prosecuted for this!"

He tapped a brick and placed it on the wet mortar, humming.

Now there was a thrashing and pounding and a crying out from within the darkening place. The bricks rose higher. "More thrashing, please," said Stendahl. "Let's make it a good show."

"Let me out, let me out!"

There was one last brick to shove into place. The screaming was continuous.

"Garrett?" called Stendahl softly. Garrett silenced himself. "Garrett," said Stendahl. "Do you know why I've done this to you? Because you burned Mr. Poe's books without really reading them. You took other people's advice that they needed burning. Otherwise you'd have realized what I was going to do to you when we came down here a moment ago. Ignorance is fatal, Mr. Garrett."

Garrett was silent.

"I want this to be perfect," said

[Turn page]

ADVERTISEMENT

Do We Have To Die?

Thirty-nine years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong, can be solved.

In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Thirty-nine years ago, he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back to England to die, when a strange message came—"They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there,

under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his 21 years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power which there came to him.

Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the world's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 39 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. L-462, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

Stendahl, holding his lantern up so its light penetrated in upon the slumped figure. "Jingle your bells, softly." The bells rustled. "Now, if you'll please say 'For the love of God, Montresor,' I might let you free."

The man's face came up in the light. There was a hesitation. Then, grotesquely, the man asked, "For the love of God, Montresor."

"Ah," said Stendahl, eyes closed. He shoved the last brick into place and mortared it tight. "*Requiescat in pace, dear friend.*"

He hastened from the catacomb.

IN the seven rooms, the sound of a midnight clock brought everything to a halt.

The Red Death appeared.

Stendahl turned for a moment, at the

door, to watch. And then he ran out of the great House, across the moat, to where a helicopter waited.

"Ready, Pikes?"

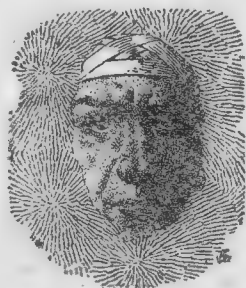
"Ready."

"There it goes!"

They looked at the great House, smiling. It began to crack down the middle, as with an earthquake, and as Stendahl watched the magnificent sight, he heard Pikes reciting behind him in a low, cadenced voice:

"—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher."

The helicopter rose over the steaming lake and flew into the west.



THE POWER OF SUGGESTION

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

HOW great is the power of suggestion? There is a school of neurologists who claim that suggestion can kill, can enslave, can dominate personality. As an example they point to primitive tribes, the members of which die within a few days if convinced they have been cursed by a witch doctor or evil spirit.

Not true of more civilized peoples? Perhaps. At any rate, in 1932, at a convention of European medical specialists in Paris, a French neurologist conducted what he termed a "limited experiment" in suggestion.

This doctor convinced a blindfolded subject that a burn had been administered just above his elbow with a red hot poker. At first the subject was skeptical. As the neurologist continued talking, the subject began to show signs of discomfiture. Perspiration broke out and he admitted pain in the area under discussion.

Within a few minutes a large red spot, similar to a light burn, and surmounted by a water blister, developed on the spot upon which the neurologist had concentrated his attention. At least one hundred doctors present could vouch that no object of any kind had touched the subject. The neurologist continued his lecture with the assurance that given ample time, and more intimate working conditions, he would have the power to shock the subject to death.

There are many other instances on record of remarkable results achieved by the power of suggestion. Whether any great credibility can be given to these is a matter of individual judgment and belief. But the subject opens a field for fascinating speculation.



As I directed our repair crew,
Helen was still in back of my mind

LITTLE JOE

By CLEVE CARTMILL

AS we used to say when we were kids in school, more people killed and blood all over the stars.

That's the way it was, and only my choice of being eaten alive rather than burned to death got me—or what's left

of me—off the Piratoid alive. The doc says most of my skin will grow back.

Oh, everything was fine last Tuesday morning. The *Dolphin* was almost loaded, we'd been paid for our Acton jobs, and Cap, Carroll, Pat and I were study-

The Space Salvagers Pit Themselves Against Pirates!

ing star charts in the control room.

Pat had worked out what he thought was the probable orbit of the lost asteroids we wanted, and was explaining his reasons when the green light flashed on our screen. I toggled the switch and looked at the grim face of the Port Patrol Officer, Colonel Gray Hardy.

"Which one of you is Jake Murchison?" he asked.

"Oh, Glory!" I said. "What have I done now?"

"Come to my office immediately," he ordered.

"Sorry," I said, "I'll have to kiss you good-by from here. We're blasting off in an hour."

His grim expression relaxed. "Good! I didn't know you were so near ready. Come over here—now!"

"Aw, Colonel. I haven't even told my girl friends so-long."

"This is serious, Murchison. And an order."

"Okay," I grumbled, and cut out. I called for a taxi, and glared at Cap. "What do you suppose Solar has done now?"

Cap pushed his skipper's hat back on his silver hair. "You've got to go along with it, Jake. The Space Patrol is law."

Pat raised his weather-cracked face from the chart and his emerald eyes twinkled. "It's your charm, Jake. People always wanting you for something."

I grunted. "Might as well hold up on charting a course. I got a hunch we'll never start hunting Phamign's laboratory. Come on, Carroll, let's get out on the landing stage."

Carroll straightened his seven-foot frame and widened his eyes. "Me?" he asked in that crooning, gentle voice that was like music coming out of a mountain. "With you?"

"Sure, you might as well get in the act. I may have to let you sock somebody."

WE went out on the stage, three hundred feet from the ground, and presently a cab landed. Carroll folded himself into it, and I told the jockey where. We swooped up and across the

field, with me giving the far side of it the aching eye.

There, dwarfed by distance, the *Andromeda* stood on her tail in the launching cradle, her nose a proud mile in the air. There, Captain Helen Wall of Solar System Salvage Co., Ltd., would soon be waiting for me to come and tell her those things you tell girls when you aren't going to see them for a while.

We whooshed over the vast station and the stream of shuttle cabs loading passengers into the *Andromeda*, over the gay, colored roofs of the residential section of Arcton City, and came to rest on the heavily guarded Space Patrol building with a gentleness that would have made a falling feather seem like a bomb.

"Nice going," I said to the jockey, and tipped him too much.

A guard demanded information. I identified myself, and he gave Carroll the eye.

"And this character?" he asked.

"My shadow."

"Awful big shadow, bud. I got orders about you, but none about him."

"Then I'll give you some. He goes with me."

We had something of a hassel, involving a call to Colonel Hardy, and finally went to his office.

Oh, not as simply as it's stated. Not by a long shot. We went through the usual screening, and had to take an oath never to reveal anything we saw or heard inside the sanctum. The penalty was read to us officially. They were colorless official phrases, but my spine turned cold anyway. Then we were allowed to go inside.

Colonel Gray Hardy sat at his desk and motioned us to chairs. I didn't sit down immediately, for the room hit me right smack in the mind. It was big enough, but no bigger, to hold the things it held, plus a few inhabitants. These were either men or women, and all were busy at their appointed tasks. They did or did not notice us. And that's all I can say about it.

The colonel flipped a switch. A ship filled a screen. It was a gigantic thing,

that poor, crippled ship, and its Space Patrol emblem—bright Earth seeming three-dimensional—was scorched with spots of brown.

Its side showed a gaping ragged tear, about one hundred yards long. It spun slowly and lazily on its long axis.

I whistled. "Mice?" I asked.

"Yeah," Hardy grunted. "Little Joe mice."

There was a name to conjure with. Pirate, murderer, dirty dog. Escapee from Kragor, head of the worst gang of cutthroats in history.

"No survivors, then," Carroll murmured.

"On the contrary," Hardy corrected. "Our ships carry weapons that—" He outlined the weapons, their type and destructiveness. "Captain Tommy Garfield knocked out the pirate fleet of five ships, damage ranging from negligible to total disablement. The ships withdrew and limped off. For their base, we think. But none of our personnel were killed. However, the ship—" He gestured.

"If it had had a coat of herculium," I said.

"But it didn't," he snapped.

"Solar's fault. We've got plenty of it, but they tied it up until recently."

"Never mind that," Hardy said. "I want you to get that ship into operation. If you can do it quickly, it can seek out the pirates' hiding-place and wipe out the worst band of— Well, you know what they are. There's plenty in it for you, including part of the reward when we capture or kill Little Joe and his murderers."

"What's the matter with the Patrol's repair ships?"

"The nearest is a week away. You're here. You have or can get the necessary materials to patch that hull and let the men aboard get out of space suits."

"We're not a repair outfit," I grumbled.

He smiled and shook his head. "That won't get you anywhere. Space Salvage, Inc., has hung up a record of being all things to all men in trouble. You can do the job—and you will do it. This is an

order, Mr. Murchison."

"Don't be so formal. Just call me Hard Luck Jake. Look what you're doing to me—and this is confidential. We have a lead on the possible whereabouts of Professor Phamign's laboratory—you know, the guy who invented the founding process for herculium?"

"I know."

"No doubt you also know about our salvaging all the herculium in the System?"

"From the derelict," he broke in, "the *Astralot*. Go on."

"Okay. Now, when we thought that was all the herculium and all there would ever be, we got dough-happy. That was worth an incalculable fortune. But we learned a short time ago that he left notes on the process—probably—in his private laboratory on an asteroid that's wandered off in space. And we think we can find it."

"Do this job first, and then happy hunting."

"But listen, Colonel. You know that Solar System Salvage is after our necks. They tied up the herculium so we couldn't sell it, and otherwise heckled. I'm sure they're doing everything they can to beat us to that formula."

HE shrugged and said negligently, "So what? What difference does it make who has it, just so it's found?"

"Just this. I want to give it to the Council so that it will belong to the race, so it can be produced and utilized to the best possible advantage to everybody. I don't know what Solar would do with it, but I got ideas. Some pretty sharp operators in that outfit. They'd probably manufacture it and give it away for a while just to keep us from selling ours. So I want to beat 'em to it and turn it over to the Council on a royalty basis."

"Very laudible, Jake, and I sympathize with you. But if they steal a march on you, they steal it. Wiping out this gang of pirates is the most immediate important thing, and you're going to help. And we're wasting time."

"Don't get me wrong," I said. "I

don't mean that I don't like doing your job. I'm just sorry we're the nearest outfit that can do it. Oh, well." I looked at Carroll. "Ready?"

He had been making notes. He frowned at them. "I guess so. Oh! What's the course?"

The colonel gave us a chart. I took a last look at those amazing panels, and we took off.

"You can take care of that," I told Carroll. "I'll drop you off and go on to see Helen. Nobody, even the Space Patrol, is going to cheat me out of that."

Carroll grinned. "Kiss her good-by for me."

"No spares," I said. . . .

I still had Helen in the back of my mind as we riveted plates on the hull of the *Starshot*. I saw red hair, green eyes and coral—but soft—lips everywhere as I directed our repair crew. My magnetic shoes held me to the hull, and standing in the dark vacuum of space was like lying down where there was gravity. All I had to do was close my eyes and I could see and hear:

"Jake, Jake." This was a remembered whisper. "Good-by, Jake." This was filled with tears.

"Heck," I said, forgetting I was speaking into my talker.

"Trouble?" asked Captain Tommy Garfield's voice.

"Need me?" from Carroll.

"Sorry," I said. "I was just remembering my last crap game. Snake eyes. Hey, Pete," I said to the welder. "Make it bluer."

Finally, I sent the crew back to the *Dolphin* and told Tommy Garfield: "All finished."

"Good," his voice answered. "Will you and that giant—uh, Carroll?—come aboard?"

"Why, certainly. But why? We're finished."

"This is confidential."

"Okay. Carroll, you there? Bring the life boat."

"Right, Jake."

Captain Garfield welcomed us in the control room, with one arm in a sling. His face was drawn and you wouldn't

think he was under thirty. He was though, as were all Space Patrol active personnel. The ship had been pumped full of air, and we took off our space suits. He seated himself in front of a panel of things I can't talk about and put it to us bluntly.

"You're going along."

"For reasons?"

"Several of our weapons," he said, "were damaged and are no good. My chief repairman was hurt much worse than I am. We can travel now, but I want you and Carroll to fix things en route. You'll get added pay."

"Okay, on one condition."

"Wait." He raised one weathered hand. "Before you raise any questions, I want to tell you this is not part of your job. You don't have to go. I intend to go into action once we find Little Joe and his crowd. You might be killed. So it's a volunteer job."

"All right," I said impatiently, "but we bring our own pilot."

"Oh, no. My pilot's all right."

I SAID pointedly, "But he's only a Space Patrol pilot."

"And is that bad?" he queried.

"Sure, comparatively. I have schemed a good trick, Cap—oh, the devil—Tommy!"

He grinned. "Yeah, Jake?"

"Understand my attitude first. I regard you as a Space Patrol captain and I know what that means. One man in a million can qualify for it. I'm just a fair salvage bum, and I feel properly humble, even if I don't show it. So what I'm asking is a favor, with a sound commercial basis."

"I'm willing to listen. You're never dull."

"Thanks. I know your job is to wipe out those pirates. Thanks to us, you're able to follow hot on their trail and maybe find them. From what I've seen here and in Colonel Hardy's office you'd need to blast only once if you find them in a group. Right?"

"Right."

"And that would be total destruction?"

"There wouldn't be enough of anything left," he said gravely, "to make a counterfeit dime."

"That's what I thought. We're a salvage outfit, in the business to make money. If we could salvage those five ships, crippled or not, this job would pay off big. Regulations prevent you from cashing in on it, but you can really do us a good turn if you'll give me the chance."

He turned this over in his mind for a few moments. "But why your own pilot? I'm not saying," he added hastily, "that I can turn you loose on any scheme, but I can listen."

I told him about Pat's qualifications, and described the rescue of the *Andromeda*. "It was touch and go, holding the exact distance and speed necessary to do the job. There's the whole point. Space Patrol men are trained to operate along regulated lines, but we're an informal outfit. We have to improvise. and I'd feel safer with Pat at the controls."

"But what's your plan?"

"I don't have one yet. I need more data. And Pat's a kind of lightning calculator. He astrogates in his head."

"Sorry," Tommy said after a long silence. "Rules."

All of us stood on one foot for a moment. Then Carroll murmured: "He was a Space Patrol pilot until he reached the age limit."

"That's right," I said. "He was retired at thirty, but he never talks about it. I'd forgotten. So you've got nothing here that Pat doesn't know something about, at least. And he's never said a word to me about Patrol secrets."

"Well," Tommy allowed, "that does make a difference. All right, he can come aboard. But I want it strictly understood that what I say goes. I'll string along if you come up with something good, only because I know your reputation for landing right side up, but my decision is final."

"Thanks a lot, Tommy."

I sent Carroll after Pat, and talked to Cap over our shielded screen. Shielded, that is, so nobody could see the gim-

micks in the control room. They were really something.

"Follow as best you can," I said. "We'll want to come back aboard sometime."

"How?" Cap asked mildly. "You can run circles around me."

I glanced at one of the panels. "Never mind," I told him. "Do anything you like. We'll find you. You can't get lost."

It wasn't long, then, before we got out of our acceleration bunks and I asked Tommy for blueprints of what needed repair. He sent an orderly for them.

"Heaven help you," he said, "if you ever breathe a word about these things. They're really out of the System."

"We won't. Pat," I said, "you know how to operate those what's-its. If you get a fix, stay outside the pirates' range and let me know."

CARROLL and I studied the blueprints and went to work on some of the most interesting things I have ever seen. We could be intercommmed by Pat and vice versa, and we had just finished the last job when Pat called.

"Well, Jake," said Pat's voice from the intercom, calm as if he were asking what time it was, "I'd have laid odds we'd never find 'em, but here they are."

"Hold everything then. We're coming in."

In the control room, while I looked at the screen, Pat translated dial readings into concrete data.

"Planetoid," he said. "About a thousand miles in diameter. Gravity o-point-nine. That's apparently their landing field, where all those guys are working on those five ships. No sign of living quarters or buildings of any kind. Must be some somewhere, because they've got an artificial atmosphere."

"Hmm," I said. "How ve-ry interesting. Artificial atmosphere. That means an atmosphere plant. Don't anybody speak," I said. "I'm getting an idea."

They waited, and I looked at the gimmick that showed the fleet. "They can't detect us?" I asked Tommy.

"Not at this distance. The various devices"—he waved a hand at them—

"which we have are manufactured in one place by one company. Exclusively for the Patrol. Nobody can possibly get hold of any one of them."

"How does this sound, then?"

I roggled it around in my head and it began to come out clear.

"Suppose Carroll and I take the *Dolphin* life boat and land at the base of that range of hills just at dusk. We could go through that pass at night and be in sight of the pirates' field at dawn. We'll take along all the weapons we can carry—one of those side arms, for example, and a paralysis bomb—and I let myself get captured."

"Hey, slow down, I'm lost!" Tommy said.

"Would it not, Captain Garfield, be of use to the Space Patrol to know certain things about that set-up? For future reference?" I queried.

"Certainly. That's the only reason I'm stringing along with you."

"Very well. I get captured, but strapped to my thigh will be one of those things." I pointed. "I leave the switch open, and you can record whatever goes on. Carroll will have one, too, and can gauge when to move in with his paralysis bomb. Then we'll tear like crazy for the atmosphere plant and shut off the air. All they can do is surrender. No bloodshed, no fuss."

"It's just idiotic enough," Tommy reflected, "that it might work. You can see the odds. There must be two hundred men working on those ships."

"So they wouldn't be scared of one man. And we're a cinch, in the end. Even if something went wrong, you could still wipe that crowd out."

"Including you, don't forget," he pointed out. "If I have to blast, everything within fifty miles dies."

"Mmm, yes. That's a consideration." I looked at Carroll. "Think we can swing it?"

He smiled that slow, gentle smile that reminds you of a pretty girl. "Don't we always? Give me one paralysis bomb, and I'm happy."

"Well?" I asked Tommy.

"Sure, I'll try it," he answered. "But

I'll give you fifteen hours, Space time. They can repair those ships in twenty hours, and I don't want another battle with them coming in from five directions. At the end of fifteen hours, I attack. And if you haven't got things under control, you know what happens to you. This is of your own volition, and you'll sign a statement to that effect, just in case you get caught in the middle."

"Let's get stared, then."

WE landed at the mouth of the pass, sneaking up to it with dusk from the dark side. There was no road, of course, nor even a path. Bare black rocks were everywhere, and threaded among them in ragged stringers was a mosslike substance, colored a sullen greenish-brown, that was dry and crackly and smelled like wet linoleum.

This was not the only smell, we discovered as we removed ourselves and lethal baggage from the life boat. The air was clean and sweet, but it had a faint, odd odor that reminded me of the color powder blue. Why this was so I never found out. It was pleasant, though.

We worked our way up the pass for an hour and made a camp. No light, of course. We stood watch alternately until morning, then went down the pass to within a mile and a half of the pirate stronghold. It didn't take much of a look to show, we were maybe a couple of dopes.

The buildings all resembled piles of rocks, so that the planetoid looked deserted from the air, provided no movement showed to a passing ship. There was plenty of movement now, of course, with men swarming all over the crippled ships. Little Joe probably wanted those ships in flight, so he could go back and really finish off the Patrol. So let anybody who would, see whatever was going on.

I called Tommy on the gadget I had strapped to my leg. I gave him the picture as I saw it.

"Now's your chance to be sane, your last one," he said.

"You agreed," I reminded him. "And we've still got four hours and thirty-two minutes."

"I stick by my agreement, but you're taking a lulu of a chance."

"Maybe, but it's all worked out, step by step."

"Don't say I didn't try. Better leave that gadget on from now on, Jake," he urged. "If things go wrong, I'll have to use my own judgment."

"Tommy, you're making me nervous. I know that if you have to come in and blast, Carroll and I are dead kids. But please give me every chance, right up to the last second."

"I will."

"Then let me turn this gimmick off until I can give you something good. If I thought you were listening and something did go wrong, I could just picture you swooping down and drawing a bead on the back of my neck."

He chuckled. "I see what you mean. Okay! Be careful."

I switched off. "Well," I said, "how about it?"

"Let's rehash it once more," Carroll said. "You go on in and let 'em grab you. Then you turn on your gadget, and I'll have mine receiving. I'll use my judgment when to move in with the paralysis bomb and my superspecial shootin' iron. You try your best to learn where the atmosphere plant is, and we both get to it if we can. Right?"

"Sure sounds simple, doesn't it? Say, what do you suppose those cages are for, around the edge of the field?"

"Darned if I know. I wondered about that, too."

We found out what they were for—the hard way. Now everything was set, it was time to go. We shook hands, and I turned down the hill. That's when the voice came.

"Stand absolutely still," it commanded, "till we disarm you."

That was perhaps the deadliest, most vicious voice I've ever heard. Believe me, I did exactly as it ordered. I even wished I could hold back my blood corpuscles until that voice said it was all right.

Feet clattered down the pass, and Carroll was relieved of his weapon and the bomb. Hands patted me all over, found nothing, and I allowed myself to turn my head and look at our captors.

The leader, the voice, was even more evil-looking than he sounded. He had one eye and dirty ears. The other two were just run-of-the-prison guys.

"Now," rasped the voice, "where did you two drop from?"

"Funny," I said, "I was wondering the same about you."

I didn't see the blow start or finish. All of a sudden I collided with a tremendous something I learned later was his fist, and I promptly lost interest in proceedings.

When I came to, my first terrified thought was about time. Was Tommy already on his way to give us all, including Carroll and me, the business?

BUT even that terror was as nothing to what I felt when I opened my eyes. Standing almost directly over me was the most revolting and fearsome countenance I had ever seen. Not even my worst nightmares had ever created anything like this blunt, broad head with hot, yellow eyes and powerful jaws with four-inch fangs. It made no sound. It just laid its ears back and looked at me.

I yelled and rolled away across a thick, wonderful rug. This brought a big laugh from many throats, and I saw that the two-hundred-pound Kragorian hound was caged. It began to pace restlessly when I moved, its six legs moving in a smooth blur. It still made no sound, and if I'd had a weak heart I'd have died from the baleful look it held on me with unwinking steadiness. Its mate lay sleeping in one corner of the cage, uninterested.

I turned then, to see where the laugh came from. There was a bunch of men watching me, cackling gleefully. Their faces ranged from hard and ugly to positively nauseating.

"Big joke," I said, when they got quiet.

I discovered Carroll, inside a ring of

men. They all had him covered with unwavering weapons. His nose slanted off to one side and was bleeding in a small trickle which he kept wiping away with the back of one hand. He had one swollen, black, green and yellow eye. But his grin was as sweet and gentle as ever.

Next I saw two men lying in a corner, as if they had been flung there like old laundry. They didn't move, and looked thoroughly dead.

All this took two seconds. I looked at my watch. We still had an hour. Under cover of getting to my feet, I switched on the gadget strapped to my leg. I'd give Tommy some information, at least.

A small, dapper man spoke. "Show's over, men. Back to work."

All but a handful moved toward the doors. One, a sniggerer with broken teeth, said. "Boy, was you ever funny!"

"You're not," I said.

"Just wait'll them hounds is turned loose in the same room with you," he sniggered. "That I wanta see."

I kept a dignified silence at this, and presently there were in the room Carroll, his captors, the crumpled bodies in the corner, and the dapper man, Little Joe. And the hounds.

I shot a nervous glance at the cage. The pacer seemed to have taken quite a fancy to me. Those smoking yellow eyes never left me, and the beast was drooling a little.

"Shall we—get down to business?" Little Joe asked courteously.

I turned to face him. So this was Little Joe, reputedly the most vicious, desperate and wily criminal in existence. He had managed the impossible—escape from Kragor, where pirates were exiled after conviction, and he had brought off not only his band of thugs but a collection of those deadly hounds. There must be more than just these two, else why all those cages outside?

"Business?" I asked. "Whose?"

His thin dark face lighted genially. "I believe you'll agree, Mr. Murchison, that mine is more important—to me, at least. My patrol sighted the life raft of the *Dolphin* and came down to in-

vestigate. Amazingly enough, they found you. Where did you come from?" He snapped this last at me.

"The stork brought me—my mother always said."

He sighed. "I may not be able to force you to answer my questions, but I can offer you a choice. You'll die in any case. Your choice is—in what fashion."

He waved at the cage behind me. "If you don't give me the information I want, I'll set the dogs on you. Even though Carroll here is the strongest man I've ever seen"—he glanced at the crumpled figures in the corner—"he's no match for one of those hounds. And they love live and fighting meat. I won't play it safe, either, and put more hounds in here. One against each of you ought to make exciting sport. It's been some time since—" He let it hang.

"And ruin this beautiful rug?" It was really a fine thing.

He shrugged. "I have a warehouse full of such trinkets."

"I should imagine you've accumulated quite a hunk of stuff."

He smiled again. "I don't mind your pumping me, Mr. Murchison. You're as good as dead, anyway. Yes, I have accumulated a hunk of stuff in the course of my—business."

"Murder and torture!"

"Oh, yes," he said pleasantly. "I find it most amusing to see people die. Not those we kill when we intercept a rich ship. That's merely business. The most amusing are the captives we pit against the hounds. All of us get a good laugh from that." He chuckled, as if remembering.

I decided to be blunt. "Where's your atmosphere plant?"

HE hesitated, his black eyes sharp, then raised his slim shoulders. "Oh, well. You can't do anything with the information. At the end of that corridor. Now, where did you come from?"

"You seem to know everything else about me, why not that?"

"Because your presence here is an impossibility. I know the *Dolphin* was at Arcton City yesterday, and that it

blasted off suddenly. That tub could never reach here in four times the time."

"Maybe we got into a warp."

He fluffed that off. "Be sensible. There's no such thing. You couldn't have repaired that Space Patrol ship, either, in the time you had. So, how *did* you get here?"

"Maybe this is only a dream," I suggested.

He frowned. "You're in a condition of shock. I believe you'll see wisdom in answering if we let you think it over."

"You haven't told me the rest of the choice," I reminded him.

"Oh, yes. If you answer my questions truthfully, you may choose the method of death."

"Then I choose to have my great-grandchildren stuff me to death with goodies."

He smiled. "Heroics."

He was right, plenty. But if your upper lip is as limp as a wet butterfly, you've got to stiffen it somehow.

"We are going out of here," he said, and I looked surprised. "If you decide not to cooperate, you're free to leave at any time."

What was this? "Double talk, yet," I murmured.

"Watch." He went through the other exit from the room, an archway that led into what looked like a council chamber, furnished with chairs and a long table. He did something out of sight that sounded like flipping a switch and stepped quickly back inside. "Wait for the relay," he said.

He and two of the men guarding Carroll took short tubes of metal from their belts and faced the caged hounds.

"Now," Little Joe said quietly.

One of the men walked through the archway, and as he did the door of the cage clicked and snapped open. Both hounds leaped through almost faster than light, soundless, with bared fangs, drooling. Little Joe and his guard pointed the metallic tubes, and the hounds crouched, quivering.

They didn't whine, but their giant bodies shook and cringed, and it seemed there should be whines. Little Joe moved

forward and the hounds retreated, shuddering. They made a rush into the cage and cowered against its far wall. Little Joe snapped the door shut.

"Energizer," Little Joe explained, displaying the tube. "It emits energy at a frequency that's intolerable to the hounds. The doors—" he gestured—"are rigged with simple electronic viewers hooked up with the cage mechanism. So—" the genial smile again—"you're free to leave. We'll be where we can see the show, of course, but I hope you make a wise choice."

He took the Patrol side-arm and the paralysis bomb from one of the guards.

"I can see this is a very advanced type of weapon," he said, "but what is this thing?" He held the paralysis bomb gingerly.

"Just press that switch," I said, "and you got a salt shaker."

He didn't even smile at that. "Very well, think it over," he said and then called out, "We're coming through."

The switch clicked in the council chamber, and Little Joe and his playmates backed through the doors, weapons levelled. The switch clicked again, the relay flipped, and our hosts departed.

Carroll and I stared at each other, and he looked as hopeless as I felt. Not that his great shoulders sagged, not that he'd lost his gentle smile. It was deep in his dark eyes. There was no need for words. He wiped blood from his nose.

"Are you hurt bad?" I asked.

He shrugged and glanced at the crumpled forms in the corner. "Does it matter?"

"Yes."

He gave me a questioning glance. "Well, I'm still a good man in a brawl, but—" He gestured helplessly at the hounds.

"But," I pointed out, "can we do anything else?"

"I guess not," he muttered.

I sat down on the floor and cradled my head in my arms and between my knees. I heard Carroll come up behind me. He laid a hand softly on my head.

"Don't go to pieces, Jake," he crooned. "It'll be easier to fight."

I SHRUGGED him away and whis-
pered into my leg gimmick, so softly
that even Carroll couldn't hear, much
less anybody listening in. The hound
pacing, pacing, pacing with its hot eyes
fixed on me, helped cover any possible
sound of my voice.

"Listen, Tommy. We've got to make
a try for it. I think it's suicide, but
we're dead anyway when you come in
and blast. And that's in twenty minutes.
Give us every second you can. We can't
win, but we've got to try. I only hope
it's over with fast. Tell our friends the
usual things. I kind of messed this one
up, didn't I?"

I got up and raised my eyebrows at
Carroll. He nodded. I took off my jack-
et, motioned for him to give me his. I
nodded at the corridor door. We saun-
tered over. We took stances like runners
at the starting line.

"One," I whispered softly, "two . . .
THREE!"

Carroll was off like a deer, the switch
clicked, the hounds were dark streaks
of death. I flung our jackets back,
whirled and fled after Carroll.

The jacket dodge almost gave me time
enough. Almost, but not quite. It slowed
the beasts so that I had a good lead.
Carroll made it through the door at the
end of the corridor, leaving it open for
me. I plunged through and whirled to
slam it against the hounds.

But one got through. The Pacer, my
playmate. It hit the door with a crash
that almost tore it loose from the wall
and slithered inside. I slammed it, then,
before the second hound crashed, and
turned to see what was going on.

We were instantly fighting for our
lives. Carroll had leaped to one side of
the door as soon as he made it, and the
two guards, whom I saw now, had
swung their blasters. But hot on Car-
roll's heels was me, and that confused
them.

Then the hound, a flashing deadly pro-
jectile, came pinwheeling in, and the
place was an immediate shambles.

The hound leaped first for the guards
and—it looked like a friendly lick—
took the throat out of one, sort of in
passing. I looked around for a club, any-
thing, but you can't fight with panel
switches.

Then the hound leaped at me. I
jumped to one side, felt a sharp pain in
my leg and jumped harder. The commu-
nicator fell off in a corner. I fell, and
the hound hit in the middle of my back.
I tensed against the next move, tearing
my head half off, and heard a sharp
crack and the hound was gone. I rolled
to my knees, saw Carroll duck and the
hound sail over him into a panel. The
panel became junk.

I didn't see the guard fire, but I heard
the crackle as I leaped for the dead
guard's blaster. The hound and I met
head-on, and there was a ripping of
flesh—mine.

I was conscious of three things. The
first, I was really being eaten alive and
had the means to stop it. The second was
a couple of sharp cracks like a stick be-
ing broken. The third was pure reflex:
I stuck the muzzle of the blaster into
its stomach and pressed the activator.

Then I blacked out. . . .

A GAIN I had that terrible fear of the
deadline when I came to. I
smeared blood off my watch before I
did anything. Five minutes left.

The guard who had been quick when
I last saw him was now dead, his head
at an impossible angle to his body. I
understood those cracks I had heard.
Carroll looked dead against the wall.
The hound was a smoking mess. I was
weak from bleeding, and footsteps were
pounding down the corridor outside.
The other hound was giving them trou-
ble. I dragged myself to the door and
shot all the bolts and things I could find.

"Tommy!" I kept babbling. "It's
okay, Tommy." Then I remembered the
communicator and crawled over to the
corner, leaving a trail of blood. "Tom-
my!" I yelled. "Answer me!"

"Yes, Jake."

"I think we've done it, but hold off
until I find out."

"All right, Jake. I'll give you an extra fifteen minutes."

I took both weapons and burned everything in the room into smoking ruin. While this was going on, the voice of Little Joe hailed from outside several times.

"Okay," I said when I was finished. "Your atmosphere plant is done for, and so are you, bud."

"Jake, Jake," he chided gently. "Surely you don't think I'd give you a chance—impossible as it was—to get into my main atmosphere plant. That room you're in is only an emergency auxiliary. It wasn't even operating when you busted in there. That's why the door was unlocked."

"You're lying," I said, but the hollow feeling in my stomach messed up my voice.

"Not so," he said pleasantly. "And now the real fun begins. We're bringing up reinforcements—lots of reinforcements, because that door was not meant to be broken down—and a battering ram. We're not going to kill you and Carroll. We're just going to take you out on the field and turn you loose against one hound at a time. You may kill a few but we've got lots of hounds. Do you want to come out, or do we come in?"

"Go fry," I said.

I looked around the room. All that ruin, all that blood, and Carroll maybe luckily dead—all for nothing. Tommy would have to blast now, and all I would get out of it would be a prominent and flattering obituary.

"Tommy," I said into my gadget, "we picked the wrong room. Carroll looks dead, and all of me is dripping onto the floor. You better take over. Don't think it's been nice knowing you. So long."

I listened for him to say something. He didn't. I waited. He still didn't.

I felt like crying. The least the guy could do was say something, if only to tell me he'd been right and I was a complete dope.

"Tommy," I pleaded, "say something for heaven's sake!"

An orderly commotion in the corri-

dor announced the race with me as the prize. Would they get me first, or would Tommy? Thinking of the hounds, I prayed for Tommy to win.

The commotion suddenly grew to a roar of pounding feet and excited voices. This subsided, and I leaned weakly against the door, ready for anything. Tommy's voice hailed me.

"It's all over, Jake."

I let him in and stumbled over to Carroll. His heart was beating. I passed out again. . . .

WE were both in the sick bay of the *Starshot* when I came to again. Carroll was in an adjoining bunk. He grinned.

"Back so soon, Jake?"

"Is it all over?"

"All over. Tommy decided to land, since we were the center of attention, and take 'em from the rear. Are you in bad shape?"

I shrugged. "I'm still here. Considering I operated only during brief flashes of consciousness, we did all right. Did you kick that hound off me when he lit on my back?"

"And almost broke my leg. Did you actually kill it? That guard bent his blaster over my skull at the same time I was busy breaking his neck."

Tommy came in. "Hey," he said. "Are you guys lucky! You ought to see the loot. You're rich."

"Fine. I'll buy you a drink."

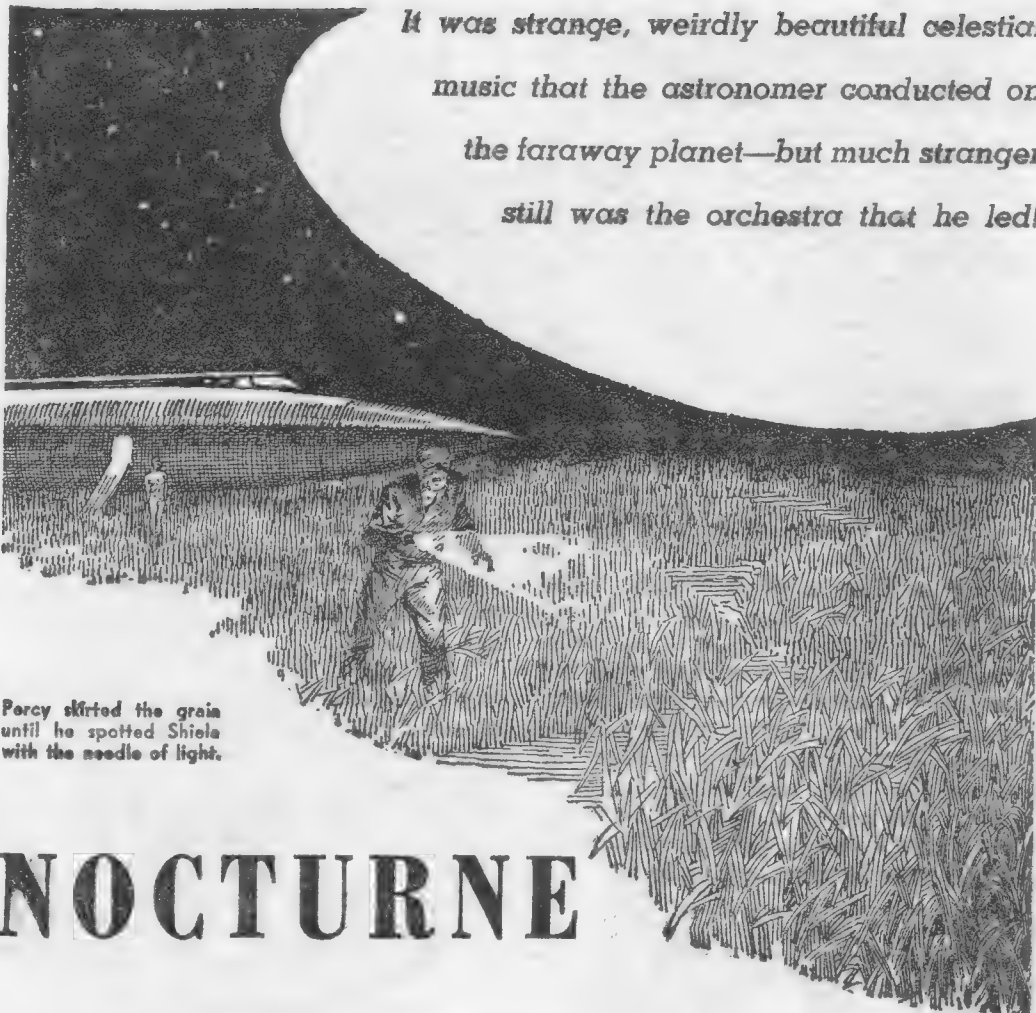
"You got so many holes in you you won't be able to hold anything for a long time." He grinned. "I understand they've got the intravenous feeding equipment all polished up for you at the hospital."

"Hospital?" I said. "Oh, no, they don't. Some damsel in distress or some incompetent Space Patrol captain would be sure to find me. I'm tired of being a sucker. We're going to transfer to the *Dolphin* in space, and hide from characters like you."

He shook his head. "You'll never do it, Jake. Somebody in trouble is sure to find you. You're that kind of a guy."

I sighed. He was probably right.

*It was strange, weirdly beautiful celestial
music that the astronomer conducted on
the faraway planet—but much stranger
still was the orchestra that he led!*



Percy skirted the grain
until he spotted Shiela
with the needle of light.

NOCTURNE

CHAPTER I

Landing on Jonah

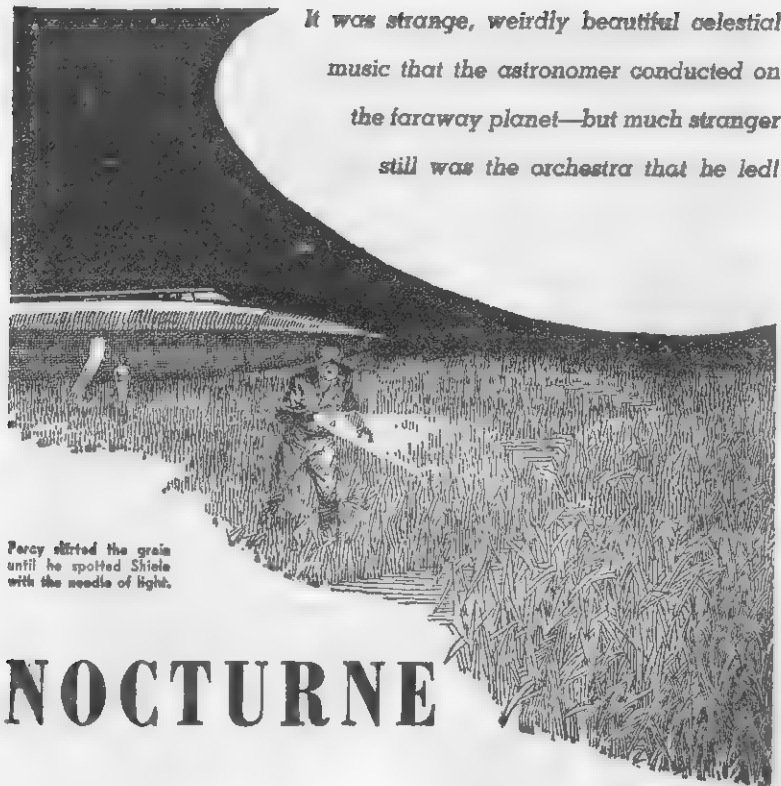
PERCY MOORE was quoting: "And it is told how Grayne of the Bright Breasts descended into hell, searching for Brian, her strong darling."

He was standing on tiptoe to peer over the shoulders of his fellow scientists—Shiela Fain, the red-haired ecologist; Fritz Schmidt, the stolid agronomist, and the Venusian ichthyologist with the unpronounceable name. All were squinting through the almost intolerable glare of the viewport as Rick Lander piloted the *Star Rover* toward her first landfall in ten months.

"Poetry again!" snorted Fritz. "I'd say Rick was trying to hit a gob of caviar frizzling on a red-hot dumbbell."

"Sorry." The little astronomer abominated the agronomist, just as he told himself he hated the others, but he kept his voice level. "If you must be technical, Rick's shooting for the single planet which revolves around L-726-8 in the constellation of Cetus, or The Whale."

"We've heard you spout all that a hundred times," hissed the ichthyologist. "L-726-8 is a red double star, located about six light years from Earth. Both



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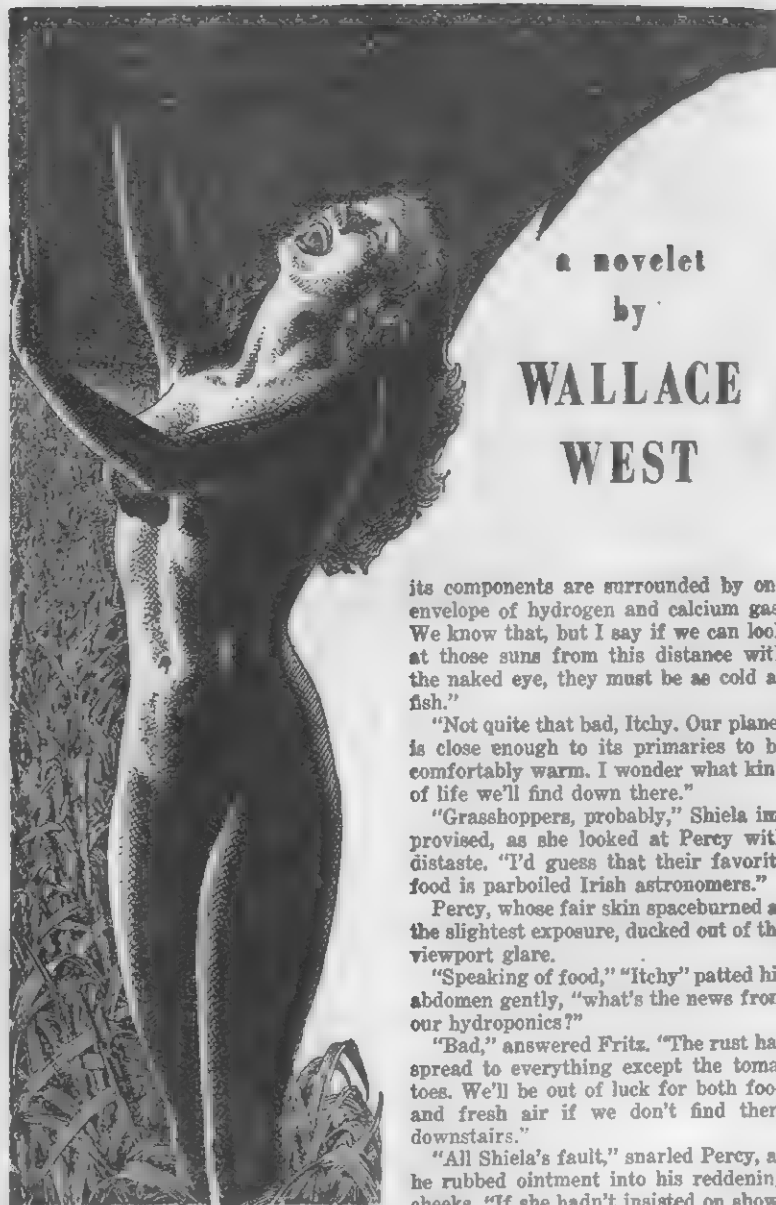
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a novelet
by

**WALLACE
WEST**

its components are surrounded by one envelope of hydrogen and calcium gas. We know that, but I say if we can look at those suns from this distance with the naked eye, they must be as cold as fish."

"Not quite that bad, Itchy. Our planet is close enough to its primaries to be comfortably warm. I wonder what kind of life we'll find down there."

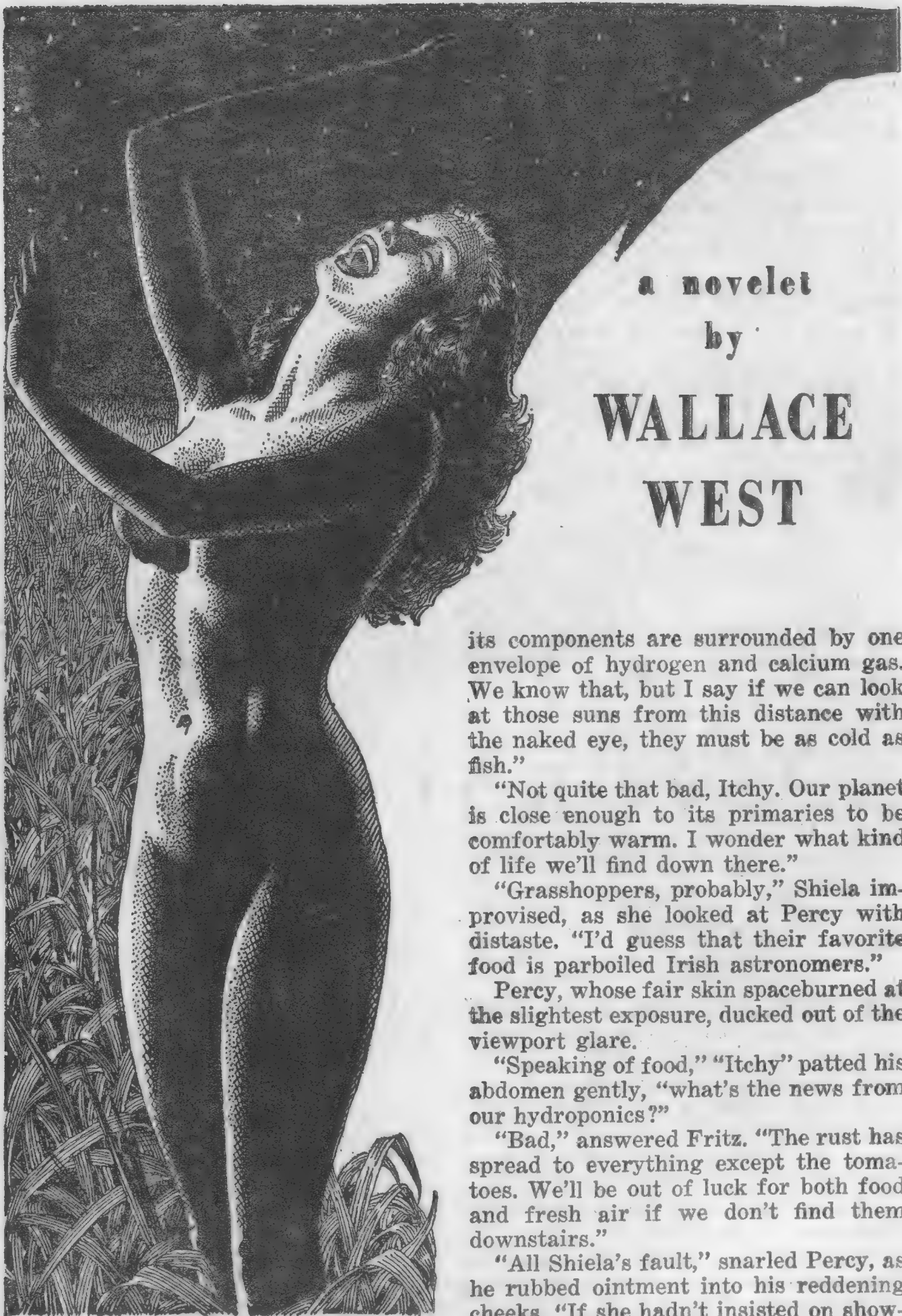
"Grasshoppers, probably," Shiela improvised, as she looked at Percy with distaste. "I'd guess that their favorite food is parboiled Irish astronomers."

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"Speaking of food," "Itchy" patted his abdomen gently, "what's the news from our hydroponics?"

"Bad," answered Fritz. "The rust has spread to everything except the tomatoes. We'll be out of luck for both food and fresh air if we don't find them downstairs."

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ing the starving Centaurans how to set up 'ponics, they wouldn't have brought those cursed rust spores into our ship on their pseudopods."

"Let's not start that again!" Shiela dropped her flippant tone. "We *had* to help the Centaurans. You know as well as I do that our charter requires us to give aid and comfort to any intelligent beings we may encounter."

"Yah!" Percy's face resembled a well-battered beet by this time, and he was in no mood for compromise. "If we should find grasshoppers when we land on Jonah, I suppose you'll insist *they* are intelligent and make us teach them how to jump farther. As for me, I'm wondering whether they'll taste better fried or grilled."

"Everything tastes better raw," said Itchy.

FURTHER argument ceased as Rick rang the alarm which meant the braking rockets were about to go on. You don't quarrel when coming in from deep space for a landing. You curl up in your bunk, strap yourself down and try to die. You do so, that is, unless you are the pilot in the control room—and then you wish you could!

The stern chase after Jonah was a long one. The ship had to rush along at fantastic speed to keep from falling into the incandescent gas cloud which reached unceasingly for it with flaming fingers. The *Star Rover* handled clumsily when out of the Warp. Nevertheless, she finally caught up with the speeding planet, circled it several times in a narrowing orbit and finally bumped thankfully to rest on a broad green plain near a winding river.

When Shiela regained enough strength to loosen her harness and stagger from her cabin to the control room, she found Rick sprawled over the console. His handsome curly head cradled in his arms, the big pilot was sleeping the sleep of the just. She stretched out a slim hand to stroke those curls, then jerked it back at the sound of footsteps.

"Go ahead, kiss him," cooed Percy,

as he entered the blister after her. "I won't look." His cynical words hid the ache in his heart.

"You knock-kneed, half-baked, insignificant little star-snooper," cried the girl, hands to her burning cheeks. "For two credits, I'd . . . I'd go and smash your precious accordion!"

"We'd better get him to his cabin," the astronomer grinned wickedly. "Sweetums has had a busy seventy-two-hour day. Here. Give me a hand."

Showing surprising strength for his slight build, he caught Rick under the armpits and backed toward the door, while Shiela carried the pilot's long legs.

"Good old Rick," he added, as they put the sleeping man into his bunk. "The only one of us who's doing what he really wants to and what he's been trained for since boyhood. The only one of us who is at home in deep space." He lit a cigarette in defiance of regulations, and concluded: "Snore, though, doesn't he?"

Every line of Shiela's flat back shouted her fury as she gave the blankets a final tuck and stalked out of the room toward the main cabin.

"Maybe we ought to wait for Rick to decide," Itchy was saying as she entered. "He's in command."

"I've checked all the instruments," Fritz argued. "The air outside is breathable and absolutely germ-free. We can see for miles over the plains, so we're in no danger from attack. Let Rick sleep while we go out and stretch our legs. What do the rest of you say?"

"Don't see any reason why not, especially since some people are ruining the little air we have left in here with cigarette smoke," said Shiela.

"I disagree," Percy cut in.

"Coward!" She spat the word at him. "Stay inside, then."

"I will. Somebody has to stand guard."

The others scrambled down the landing ramp after the main port had unscrewed. The astronomer dragged a machine gun into position so he could protect them if necessary. Then he sat down in the entry, dangled his legs and

chain-smoked as he tried to make sense out of what he saw, and out of life in general.

Superficially, the landscape resembled that of Earth. And yet, bathed as it was in ruddy light from the double sun, it was so subtly different that it made him shudder.

"Half of Shiela's prediction came true," he thought. "There's the grass—but where are the hoppers?"

The rolling landscape obviously was under cultivation. Yet what farmer would plant in such a fashion? The round fields varied from a few square yards to about an acre in diameter and had large star-shaped empty spaces between them. The crops had been planted at different times. Some of the—cane, was it?—was only a few inches high. In an adjoining patch the stalks might tower to eight feet.

"Fetishism, I suppose." He shifted his seat to keep out of the midday sun. "Fantastically wasteful, though. I don't get it."

His attention turned to his companions, who were skylarking like children escaped from school. Taking advantage of the low gravity, they had started a wild game of leapfrog along the riverside.

"They're basically a decent lot," he mused, "so why do they keep ribbing me? Is it because we've been cooped up in this space-can too long? Does my accordion playing annoy the rest of them the way it does Rick? My name, perhaps? I can't help that. Or is it just that we're all misfits: Fritz, who wanted to be a lawyer. Itchy, whose real ambition was to be a fisherman. Shiela, whose heart was broken when she found she didn't have the voice for grand opera."

HE SHRUGGED and fumbled for his lighter, remembering their first quarrel. That had been on the way out from Earth to Centaurus. They were all one happy family then, before the space jitters got them, and Shiela had seemed quite fond of him. She had been singing folksongs to his accordion accompaniment, when he had ventured to

suggest that she really was a contralto instead of a soprano.

One word led to another. After the blowup they had not spoken for months, and Rick had taken his place in her heart.

"Be careful," he heard Shiela call, now, after Fritz had made an especially spectacular leap. "Don't damage the crop. And don't step on so much as a bug until I can learn the ecological setup here."

"Bug?" said Itchy, nibbling one of his foreclaws in puzzlement. "There are no bugs. No birds either, and not a fish in the entire river. What a dump!"

"That is odd." Fritz was dusting himself off. "How does this cane become fertilized without the help of insects? Bisexual, do you suppose?"

"And it's so quiet," said the girl. "Listen!"

But there was nothing to listen to. Not a breath of wind stirred. The cane stood dense and tall, as though carved on stone. Each of the humans could hear his own heart beating.

"The fields remind me of something," she continued. "Like—I have it!—like stubby organ pipes." She shivered despite the heat. "Maybe we'd better be getting back to the ship."

"I'll take a specimen of this and see what it looks like under the microscope." Fritz bent down at the edge of the nearest canebrake.

"No!" cried the girl.

Before the word was out of her mouth the agronomist had snapped off one of the plants at its base.

A strange thing happened then. As the stalk broke they heard a *ping*, like that made when a piano string breaks, but much louder. And as Fritz stared at his trophy in amazement, there came a soft echo of the tone from all sides, as though the horns of elfland were answering. It was a little thing, but somehow coldly frightening.

Although he was several hundred yards away, Percy heard the *ping* and its echo, as well.

"A perfect middle C," he thought. "And the responses were all comple-

mentaries. What goes on here?" Then, as he saw the others strolling hurriedly toward the ship, he called, "Don't worry, folks. I'm covering your retreat."

* * * * *

"Those plants are almost identical with terrestrial *saccharum officinarum*," Fritz told them that evening after they had finished an unappetizing meal of concentrate remnants. "It has distichous leaves, many-pointed culms, strong terminal panicles and—"

"In other words—" prompted Percy.

"In other words, it seems to be a very close relative of sugar cane. Fact is, the sugar content is extremely high. No need to worry about food any more. Just gather enough of it, run it through the synthesizer, and we'll have any kind of protein or carbohydrate we desire."

"Will it purify the ship's air if we plant it in the 'ponic tanks?" Itchy asked.

"Yep. It grows so rankly, it probably will absorb more carbon dioxide and give off more oxygen than the stuff we have been using."

"Let's start harvesting tomorrow, then." Percy pushed away his half-eaten portion of hash. "We can pay the farmers for any damage we do, if, and when, we locate them."

"No!" This time Shiela's reaction was more than her highly developed response to anything which the little astronomer suggested. "No. We mustn't touch it until the farmers give us permission."

"Now, Shiela," pleaded Fritz. "I can't scare up enough food in the whole ship to make another meal. We've got to do something."

"I know." She ran distracted fingers through her heap of auburn hair. "But I won't have the responsibility, I tell you. I think Rick should take the ship up and look for a settlement. The geometrical planting of those fields shows that a high order of intelligence exists somewhere on this planet. If we damage the cane we might lose our charter. Rick—"

"Rikki-tikki-tavi, the infallible,"

yawned Percy. "Okay. You win. We'll wait for Solomon to wake and deliver judgment."

He rose. Then, a look of astonishment on his thin face, he grabbed the edge of the table as he started to stagger crabwise across the floor.

CHAPTER II

Music in the Night

AS HIS companions roared with laughter, the answer struck him and he flushed to his ultimate freckle. He made another break for his cabin, and would have crashed into the wall if Itchy had not extruded a long leg and collared him.

"All right—laugh!" he snarled. "But wait till you stand up and seem to see the whole ship tip over."

They tried it, and had to hang on as he had done to keep from falling.

"It's really the tide," Percy condescended to explain. "Jonah is so near his suns that their pull does queer things. At noon today those suns pulled directly upward, so the only effect was our loss of weight. Since we've been at table, both suns have sunk to the horizon. We have been too busy talking to notice the change, but we're now being pulled sidewise with about the same strength as Jonah's own gravitation pulls us downward. Split the angular distance and you'll see why the floors seem to slant toward the west."

"Tonight," he continued viciously, as he jerked loose from Itchy and managed to reach the corridor, "Jonah and his primaries will all be pulling straight down. We'll be about double our normal weight. . . . Happy dreams, if your lung muscles can take it!"

"Insufferable little squirt," said Fritz, when the astronomer had gone. "Someday I'll break his conceited neck. Guess I'll put an alarm across the main port, though, and leave it open. If what he says is correct, we're going to need all the oxygen we can get tonight."

It was around midnight when Percy heard heavy shuffling sounds approaching his open cabin door. He raised leaden eyelids, managed to lift an arm and switch on the light at his bunkside, then lay inert. If a Jonahan were creeping up on him, it would have to creep. He was in no shape to offer opposition.

Instead, it was a sagging-cheeked, puffy-eyed Rick who stumbled in.

"If only Shiela could see her darling now," thought the little man, forgetting that no human is fit to look at when navigating under two G's.

"What's goin' on?" husked the pilot.

"Combined gravitational pull of Jonah and its—"

"Oh, lord, I know *that*," Rick sat down with a thump. "But I heard some sort of weird caterwauling. Thought you were playing your squeeze-box and came down to kick your teeth in."

"Not I." Percy nodded toward his beloved accordion and ignored the "caterwauling" crack from the tone-deaf pilot. "Maybe some of the others were singing."

"I looked in every cabin. They're all dead to the world."

"What kind of noise was it you heard?"

"Sounded like a million cats on a back fence."

"It would." The Ulsterman dragged himself to his feet and stood swaying groggily. "Let's look outside."

They resembled two drunks as they dragged their three hundred and fifty-pound bodies down the corridor with the aid of the hand rails. Arriving at the open port, they forgot their discomfort as they stared, slack-jawed, across the shimmering, slightly phosphorescent fields of cane.

A stiff wind was blowing now. Millions of plants, bent almost to the ground, were swaying in lazy waves under the pressure. And with each undulation, a thunder of piercingly sweet musical tones was sweeping the *Star Rover*.

This was not a meaningless caterwauling, despite Rick's description. Instead, the effect was somewhat as if a

forest of musical saws was being beaten in unison by primitive tribesmen.

"Like the skirling of bagpipers marching forward over a lost battlefield mounded with corpses," whispered Percy.

"Of all the gosh-awful rackets under heaven—" Rick began.

"Shut up!" The astronomer bent his head and listened intently.

"Diatonic scale, like that of the ancient Greeks," he muttered. "No half tones. No minors. No chords. No dissonances. Just a monody in march time. Lord, how far can one go back?" Then he quoted in a changed voice: "*'Agas gobhfaisfaidh an fear no dhiaidh sin thrid mo lar anios!'*"

RICK'S voice came loud and harsh through a pause in the music. "Stop that Gaelic blithering!" He was sweating, though the air was cool.

"It seemed appropriate, somehow," Percy explained. "The line is from Ronsard's lament for Mary, Queen of Scots: 'And until the grass shall grow after that up through my heart.'" As a rush of wind sent the music soaring to a nerve-racking climax of dominants, he continued: "Those overtones tell the story. This is the kind of music Siva taught the Hindus when he played to them on his zitar with its million sympathetic strings."

"I think you're whacky, calling this stuff music when it's only a noise that rattles my back teeth. Come inside." He was white as a sheet as he plucked at Percy's pajama sleeve. "I can't take it."

"Your being tone-deaf makes it easy for those subsonics and supersonics to frazzle your nerves," the astronomer explained, as he pressed the buttons which set the port revolving into an airtight and soundproof seal. "You need a stiff drink."

Rick leaned against the corridor wall, wiping his face and taking great gasps of air, as though he had just run up five flights of stairs.

"What's out there?" he panted at last.

"Life," answered Percy. "Intelligent life of a high order. Those cane fields

make up a giant wind organ. My guess is that the size of the patch and the height of the cane determines the note on which each vibrates. But," he continued gravely, "where is the keyboard for that organ and what kind of being sits at it? He . . . or it . . . is a primitive. That's shown by the barbaric quality of the music. Perhaps we can find him tomorrow. Come on to bed, now. You look shot."

"I don't like it." The man who could whip the *Star Rover* through a nucleonic storm or a "coal sack" without flinching, was on the verge of hysteria. "I'm going to take the ship up and find a quieter spot. I can feel that infernal racket still—in here." And he rubbed his head in explanation.

"Suit yourself, Rick. But don't try to leave Jonah. The air-conditioner's down and the food's low."

"Do I have to have you tell me my business?"

The pilot staggered away. Percy was buckled into his harness by the time the rockets roared.

It did not surprise him, the next morning, to find the *Star Rover* nested in a field of cane identical with the one she had left. Apparently the whole planet was covered with the stuff, was one vast instrument.

Rick seemed his old supermanic self at breakfast, now that the suns were shining and the "caterwauling" had stopped. As usual, he made a great fuss over Shiela, and she almost purred whenever his laughing eyes met hers. It was tacitly understood that they would be married, someday.

"I've been talking things over with the others," he boomed as Percy skittered in late, over a floor which now seemed tilted toward the east. "Flew clean around Jonah last night. The whole darn planet, outside of its seas, rivers and lakes, is just like what you see outside. Completely uninhabited. Nothing but canebrakes."

"Should be ideal for colonization," Shiela put in.

"Not for Venusians," Itchy objected, as he slopped the chowder which was

his only remaining shipboard food. "No fish. My people like fish. Five times a day!"

"Okay. We'll log it fit for terrestrials and be on our way home. Fritz has completed his analysis of the flora, fauna and soil."

"That was easy," grinned the Dutchman. "No fauna. One type of flora. Soil a uniform sandy loam high in humus."

"But who made that music last night?" Percy asked.

"Music, he calls it!" Rick laughed. "You folks should have heard it! Nobody and no thing would be caught dead making noises like that. It's just a natural phenomenon. I'll log that, too, and suggest that only deaf persons be sent here as colonists. . . . Fritz, the next move's up to you."

"First thing we do is clean the 'ponic tanks so we can transplant cane into them. That will guarantee our air supply in space and also give us some green stuff to ward off scurvy. Then we'll mow several acres of the cane, dehydrate it and pack it ready for the food synthesizer. Drop your forks. We've got a nasty job ahead."

THEY found that the 'ponics, except for the three tanks containing healthy tomato plants, were a sour mess, due to ravages of the Centauran rust. Up to their knees in rotting vegetation, the quintet scraped, cursed, slid and perspired until they had stoked the last of the pulpy rubbish down the incinerator. They finished by hosing out the glass tanks and disinfecting them with the strongest solution Fritz could mix.

By the time the room was bright and shining once more, the day was so far advanced, and they were so exhausted and filthy, that they postponed any attempt at transplanting new growth until the next morning. After a dip in the brook, which seemed intent on running uphill and crawling over its western bank, they ate a skimpy meal of scraps and tumbled into their bunks.

Percy woke to the sounds of music and of Rick's grumbling as the pilot clumped past his door. He followed, to

find the others grouped on the landing ramp. It had been lifted clear of the ground for safety's sake.

Percy tried not to look at Shiela, who resembled her own grandmother under the pull of high gravity. The others were a depressing enough sight—with the exception of Itchy, whose hard shell could not sag.

"I never heard anything so lovely," the girl was saying as he approached. "Reminds me of a wordless Gregorian Chant."

"Listen to her!" Percy snorted. "It hasn't the slightest resemblance to an ecclesiastical Plain Song or *Cantus Firmus*. There's no mode or meter. Hardly any melody."

"Showoff! I studied voice for three years in Italy, remember."

"You wasted your time." He was fighting to keep down his anger at her display of ignorance, but it was no use. His hunger for her was so great that the only way he could keep any control over himself was to get fighting mad.

"Squeeze-box artist!"

"Cut it out, you two," rapped the pilot. Usually he encouraged them to be at each other's throats, but now he was in no mood for the cruel sport. "And shut that port. I'm going crazy! Can't sleep a wink."

"But we've got to get to the bottom of this," protested the girl. "That cane is making real music. Which means one of two things: Either it is intelligent, which I can't believe, or somebody is—*is playing* on it. That being the case, we don't dare transplant or cut any of it until we get permission. New Washington would be sure to lift our charter if we—well, harmed it."

Deep in his heart, Percy agreed with her, but his hurt pride forced him to side with Rick for once.

"She's talking nonsense," he told the worried pilot. "As you suggested, those tones must be the result of natural phenomena. There's nothing to get upset about."

"You're wrong on the last point," frowned Rick. "Personally, I haven't

been so upset since I was a kid and my mother dragged me to hear a performance of Tannhäuser. About halfway through the opera I started having hysterics. She took me home and gave me a good hiding. Now, get that port shut before I start banging my head against the wall."

He meant it!

They got little sleep the rest of the night, what with their weight and the closeness of the air inside the closed ship. They snapped at one another during a sketchy breakfast, then set grimly to work uprooting a large area of cane.

CHAPTER III

When the Cane Screamed

THE job proved difficult. The apparent early morning tilt of the fields made them seem to be digging into the face of a steep hillside. In addition, the roots of the plants formed a tangled mat extending three feet below the surface. Nevertheless, they kept doggedly at it until, by midafternoon, they had the 'ponic tanks jam-packed with burgeoning growth.

"Let's knock off," begged Itchy, whose long, carapaced body was more fit for tunneling than for strip mining.

"No," said Rick. "I want to get away from this cursed place as fast as possible. Let's try to finish."

Shiela, who had said hardly a word all day, spoke up now. Her piquant face was smudged and strained. Her voice shook ever so little as she inspected the crop of blisters on her hands.

"I still think we're going about this the wrong way," she said. "For hours, I've been convinced that the cane has been passively resisting our efforts to uproot it. I'm sure it doesn't want to be transplanted, but since we haven't—haven't hurt it much, it—"

"Look, my dear," answered Rick, as he slipped a possessive arm around her

bowed shoulders. "I know this digging is no work for a girl. Why don't you go back to the ship and rest while we finish?"

"It isn't that." She drew away from him. "It's just that I think we're going at this in too much of a rush. We should learn more about this life form before we start killing—and *eating*—it."

"What do the rest of you think?" asked the pilot.

"I've learned everything that microscopes and test tubes can tell me," answered the agronomist. "I found no sign of intelligence."

"I'm hungry and I want to go home," was Itchy's reply.

Rick glanced at Percy, but the little man said nothing as he leaned on his spade at a weird angle and wiped the sweat out of his eyes.

"That settles it, then. Shiela is overruled. Break out the machetes and get busy."

Suiting action to word, Rick swung one of the razor-sharp knives at the edge of the nearest field.

A second later he staggered back, tripped over his own feet and crashed to the ground.

For the stalks of cane were screaming as they fell!

They made a sickening, ghastly sound, and it was multiplied hundreds of times by the sympathetic responses set up in the untouched fields.

Rick leaped to his feet. His face was frightful to behold. For the first time since he had left Earth he went to pieces, lost command of himself and of the situation.

"Filthy garbage!" he railed, plunging into the thick of the brake and swinging his machete like a man possessed, despite Shiela's wail of protest. "Talk back to a man, will you? Take that—and that! Lie down and say 'Uncle'!" He was a boy again, pummeling an enemy.

Although his voice was soon lost in a rising billow of chaotic, agonized sound, his frenzy communicated itself to all of the others except the girl. Caught up in a mob psychology, they

ran to his aid and hacked and yelled above the uproar until the sap from the severed plants flowed stickily over their boots.

"Saint Bartholomew's Day," thought Percy, a part of whose mind seemed to be watching the "massacre" from miles away.

He was remembering a grisly tale his old grandmother once told him, a tale of the ghostly football players of Cushendun, who used a skull for their ball and the crumbling gate of a forgotten graveyard as their goal. But even as his thoughts raced and clamor shook the red sky, he went right on chopping cane.

Before they collapsed from sheer exhaustion they had cut ragged gaps in four fields. After the shortest possible rest period they loaded endless bundles of the stuff on their aching backs and wrestled them up the ramp. As the suns went down, they helped Fritz cram most of their harvest into the dehydrator, and a small part of it into the synthesizer for conversion into their evening meal.

"We'll finish up tomorrow and get the blazes out of this dump," said a sheepish Rick as they sat, red-eyed and relaxed, around the dining table, waiting for their food to cook. "I didn't mean to go haywire, Shiela, but I've had about all I can stand of Jonah."

SHIELA didn't answer. She sat looking at her hero as though he were a stranger. The tension was broken when a trap at Itchy's place clicked and deposited a steaming pile of synthetic fish cakes. He hissed with delight and attacked them with both hands.

The others got what looked like charcoal steak and French fries.

"The best I could turn out in a hurry," Fritz apologized.

He and Rick got busy plying knife and fork. Percy was trying to show his will power by finishing a cigarette before starting to eat, but the effort made sweat stand out on his high forehead.

Sheila took four or five bites, then pushed her plate away.

"What's the matter, honey?" Rick

asked through a full mouth.

"I don't know. Guess I'm just too tired to eat."

"She means," Percy grinned, "that she feels like a cannibal—or like a little girl who can't bear to eat her pet hen."

"That's not so!" stormed the ecologist. Then, as her face assumed a greenish tinge, she dashed from the room.

"Crazy kid," chuckled Rick, as he polished off his plate and pushed the "seconds" button. "She'll get over it. This is the best meal I've had since we left home. You outdid yourself, Fritz."

The agronomist wasn't listening. Instead, he was staring at Percy.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked. "Did Shiela's performance make you queasy, too? You haven't touched a bite."

"No," lied the astronomer. He couldn't even give that much credit to his foe. "It's—it's just that I don't quite trust this stuff. I want to see what a diet of synthesized singing cane does to you folks before I try it."

"Our pal!" Rick's face paled. "Eat up. That's an order!"

"There's nothing in the ship's articles which gives you command over my diet," Percy snapped.

"Get out of this cabin before I brain you, you little wart!" Then, with false heartiness to Itchy: "Let me try one of those fish cakes. They look good."

The sound of munching died away after Percy left.

"If there's ever a murder aboard the *Star Rover*, you'll know that I committed it," gritted Rick.

* * * * *

Gnawing hunger and his steadily increasing weight made sleep impossible for Percy. He heard the cane begin to tune up after darkness fell and the night wind rose.

For half an hour the music was tentative, hardly reaching his cabin. But when, at last, it swelled to its first crescendo, the sound jerked the astronomer out of his bunk to stand trembling, with fingernails biting into his palms.

For this time the sound really was a

discord, rasping, horrible and somehow obscene. It affected the highly trained ears of the listener in much the same way that the perfect monody of previous nights had ripped the nerves of the tone-deaf pilot.

"'Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune,'" he choked.

The music broke off in midsweep, as though ashamed. It tried again. And again that soul-shattering discord.

Percy crawled back into bed and buried his head under the blankets. He stifled there for what seemed an eternity, then emerged cautiously. The night was utterly still. Or was that a lagging footstep far down the corridor?

Throwing on part of his clothes, he headed in the direction of the sound. Glancing into the cabins of his companions as he passed them, he saw that each was empty.

The landing ramp was empty, too, and, worse still, had been lowered until it touched the ground. He clumped back to the control room, found a lantern and returned to the port.

As he got there, the music resumed. But now there was no discord. The monody was perfect, leaping and triumphant.

PERCY swept the searchlight across those slaughtered fields, then ran down the ramp. Moments later, he had Rick's white body focused in the beam.

The big fellow's nakedness was partially concealed by a scattering of tall stalks which had escaped his machete earlier in the day. His eyeballs were rolled upward until only their whites showed. He was swaying lightly to the breath of the night wind. And he was keening like a banshee on the perfect—for him, impossibly perfect—tone of Middle C.

Percy knew, almost without having to listen, that, with Rick's help, the brake was able to regain its proper pitch.

He grasped his chief's brawny arm and shook it fiercely. The only response was a reflex which sent him sprawling. He tried again, shouting hoarse warn-

ings, and went down from a wild punch which closed his right eye.

Shaking with pain and fright, the little man went in search of Fritz. He could not budge the bellowing Dutchman. Itchy, too, was in the same cataleptic state and hissing like a calliope in the bass clef.

Percy skirted the waving, bowing grain until he spotted Shiela with the needle of light. She stood slim amidst her discarded garments, knee-deep in a trampled growth of young cane. From her round throat was pulsing a contralto note so sweetly perfect that it tore his heart.

"Shiela!" he called, when the breeze and the music died for a moment. "Shiela! Can you hear me?"

Her supple arms, upthrown above her head, did not stop their languid motion, but he fancied her body strained toward him.

"Shiela! It's Percy. Come here at once!"

She shook her head, sending her long, unbound hair in waves over milky shoulders and tip-tilted bosom.

"Grayne of the Bright Breasts," he marvelled.

Then he lunged forward. Disregarding the screams of the cane which he trampled, he caught the girl around the hips, slung her over his shoulder and ran for the ship.

She fought him like a cat. Her nails ripped his back and her knees beat a tattoo against his ribs. Somehow, though, he managed to stagger up the ramp, dump her on the corridor floor and seal the port.

As the sound of music died the girl yawned, stretched and opened her eyes. Then she screamed and fled like a nymph pursued by fauns.

"Shiela," he called, as soon as he had regained his breath and followed her to her locked cabin. "Something terrible has happened! Come out. We've got to talk."

"Go away," she sobbed. "I never want to see you again."

"It's the others," he persisted. "They're out in the brake."

"I was out there, too, wasn't I?" Clad now in a bathrobe, which clung to every womanly curve of her, she opened the door and stood leaning against the jamb. "I remember going to see what was the matter when that awful discord started. After that, everything got mixed up. I thought I was singing at La Scala. Oh, how I sang! Then you stood up in the audience and shouted at me. I hated you for ruining my aria. There was a riot or something. I woke up lying in the corridor with nothing on. I thought—"

"Never mind. Come on. I'll mix you a drink and try to explain."

"You think it was caused by the food, somehow?" she asked, half an hour later, as she fitted a poultice to his black eye.

"I'm sure of it. I ate nothing and I felt no compulsion. You had only a few bites and I was able to snap you out of it. The others gorged themselves. I couldn't budge any of them."

"It's like Circe and the men she turned into swine, isn't it?"

"Yes, although I think it's a matter of chemistry rather than enchantment. Also, I make a rather pitiful Ulysses. And where is Mercury's blue flower, which will lift the curse?"

"What can we do?"

"I don't know."

"And what can we eat?"

"Tomatoes," he answered grimly.

CHAPTER IV

Home Sweet Home

RICK, Fritz and Itchy were hammering on the port when he awoke. They laughed uproariously when he tried to tell them what had happened.

"Another of your fairy stories, Percy," jeered Rick. "It just got so stuffy in the ship that the three of us decided to sleep outside, didn't we?"

"Sure," agreed a lacklustre Fritz.

"Sure," echoed Itchy, after a pause.

"Of course we did," Rick repeated. "Fritz, I'm famished. Rustle up some ham and."

"Herring for me," warned the Venusian.

Their boisterous confidence was considerably dampened, however, when Fritz came back from inspection with a report that the transplanted cane was wilting in the 'ponic tanks.

"It almost seems to be sulking," he said with a puzzled frown. "It isn't dead. I've changed the solution. Maybe it will revive."

"Well, there's no use doing any more work outdoors until we get the 'ponics growing right," yawned Rick, as he finished his third cup of coffee. "Think I'll turn in for a while. Can hardly keep my eyes open."

He headed for his cabin and the others followed.

"What do you think, Shiela?" Percy toyed with his stewed tomatoes.

"I'm scared stiff!"

She reached out her hand as though to touch his, then drew it back and blushed.

"It's all right." He smiled ruefully. "I know you hate me, but we'll have to work together on this. Beauty and the beast, eh?"

"You're horrid!" She flounced away.

He went to his cabin and tried to think. It was no use. Idly, he took the accordion off its hook and fingered a few chords. Remembering how Rick hated the sound, he carried the instrument to the landing ramp, swung the port almost closed and sat staring out over the cane.

"Music," he said to himself at last. "They call it the universal language. I wonder?"

He rippled the keys.

"You wonder what, Percy?"

Shiela came out on the ramp, sat down beside him and hugged her dimpled knees like a little girl.

"They are—it is so primitive," he answered. "It would be like trying to explain the unified field theory in sign language. Still—"

He slammed the boards of the accor-

dion together in a crash of soaring chords. Was it his imagination, or did the cane shimmer and bow?"

"What are you thinking of?" Percy shivered like the cane as she leaned tensely against his shoulder. "We'll die here, won't we? We'll never see the green hills of Earth again."

"You mentioned Gregorian Chants the other day," he said hastily. "Here's what a real one sounds like."

Under the pressure of his long, spatulate fingers, the accordion began speaking with the voice of angels.

"Perhaps the good Pope Gregory was a wee bit hasty when he ruled that the use of sharps, flats or harmony were offenses before the Golden Throne," Percy mused, his brogue thickening. "Yet if ever there was a living man who had listened to the heavenly choir, it must have been His Holiness. The Ould Bhoy, he said, would be sure to sink his pickers and stealers into any monk who let choristers sing different notes at the same time.

"Of course," he went on, his eyes still watching the plain, "different parts of a chorus could sing in rotation. But that was antiphony, not harmony. And the poor cowed fellow who first introduced a half note in the liturgy was called a dangerous radical."

"How do you know all this?" She gazed at him in wonder.

"I studied music too, child, in Belfast." His prominent Adam's apple jumped in his throat. "I dreamed of being a great orchestra leader. "But," he grinned crookedly, "the telies weren't kind to me. I became an astronomer, then. Few people look at us."

He played on and on. The untold millions of cane stalks stood at attention. The lurid dumbbell winged its way across the saffron sky.

"And now," he said after an hour, "let's commit a sacrilege—one that would have had us excommunicated a millennium ago. Primitives, you know, abominate the tritone, or use it only as a warble in air-raid sirens. Gregory called it the '*diabolus in musica*.' Listen! I'll give them fair warning."

He ended the last chant with a scandalous ululation of thirds.

From all points of the compass a thin, shocked wailing answered him. The cane writhed as though in torment.

"So endeth the first lesson." He rose and helped the girl to her feet. She did not draw away, and he went on: "To-night we'll know whether my hunch is working."

THAT evening he was on the alert and blocked Shiela's path as she started with the others out of the ship. She came to herself almost at once and followed him meekly to the landing platform.

There, as the night wore on, they sat listening raptly to a succession of Plain Songs in the eight proper church modes which would have delighted Pope Gregory's pious old heart.

"Very good indeed," beamed Percy in the hour before dawn, after he had brought a blanket from his cabin and wrapped it around the shivering, wide-eyed girl. "They learn fast. Also, you'll notice that they're skipping one note. That's because you're not doing your duty, my girl, in that field over to the left."

"It will grow up again, won't it?"

"My guess is it's growing an inch an hour right now, to be in the act as soon as possible."

"You know," she said, "this all reminds me of something I once read in an old book, by a man named Webb, or Wells. He thought life was like the sea and that the individual was only a momentary wave, or a stalk of cane growing."

"Could be." He picked up the accordion as the suns wheeled over the horizon, the breeze died and the brake grew silent. "Now, I'll give them their second lesson."

"That's an old English madrigal," Shiela exclaimed, as he swept into the lilting strains of "Sumer is icumen in."

"You did learn something when you studied voice, after all. The madrigal is also a fine example of *descantus* or counterpoint. A two-part song, you'll no-

tice, with plenty of rhythm but still no half tones or real harmony. Fra Guido of Arezzo started that ball rolling back in the Terth Century, and almost got burnt at the stake for his pains."

He shifted to the rollicking "Robin and Marion" by the Humpback of Arras, and went on:

"It was a sort of revolution, you know. People had become bored with the stiff chants. They still sang them, of course, but they started combining them with popular folksongs called 'slippery songs.' What a rumpus that raised!"

"I don't understand you, Percy." She stared at him blankly. "What are you up to?"

"Let's have tomatoes for breakfast," he yawned.

* * * * *

The *Star Rover* lay silent all day while the five explorers slept the sleep of utter exhaustion.

Percy was up in time to watch Rick, Fritz and Itchy stalk out to their nightly choir singing. They had not bothered to put on clothes this time. Neither did they speak to him or to each other. And he noticed something even more disturbing. They seemed to be acquiring characteristics of Jonah's vegetation.

Rick's curls peaked above his head for all the world like a seed pod. Fritz had lost much weight and gained a sort of elfin liteness. Itchy's shell was turning a bright green. They were drifting away, almost beyond rescue.

"The mark of cane," Percy couldn't resist saying to Shiela.

"Don't," she whispered. "The poor things! And you saved me from that."

"Only because you didn't sock me in the eye."

This night Jonah rang with as near an imitation of madrigals as the cane could supply. In fact, to the astonishment of the watchers, the men out in the field sang the words to the tunes—words they had forgotten since their far childhood on Earth.

"How about a little real harmony, now, ladies and gentlemen?" Seizing his accordion, Percy cut boldly in at the

end of a round with the crashing thunder of Luther's "A Mighty Fortress."

"The introduction of harmony in music played a big part in winning people to the Reformation," he explained to Shiela. "I'll try it again!"

Out in the fields all was confusion and dissonance for a moment.

And then the Jonahans recognized that they had met their master!

Obediently, they followed his switch to the chromatic scale, with its multitude of sharps and flats. How they did this, Shiela could only guess. Perhaps by cross resonances among the various fields of whole tones. Perhaps by wrenching their chromosomes into new patterns.

"How—" she began, then stopped.

Percy was transfigured. His hawk-nosed face had lost its homeliness. He stared unwinkingly at the high stars. His fingers flew. At last he had realized his life's ambition. He was leading an orchestra, an orchestra of billions of perfect instruments, the only living orchestra in the Galaxy. He was content.

Shiela buried her head in her arms and sobbed, silent and alone.

How he played that night! First Palestrina. Then, by easy stages, into Bach, Handel, Haydn and such early masters of the symphony as Beethoven. The unearthly orchestra obeyed and supported him. Great music furred around Jonah like a banner and the very seams and rivets of the *Star Rover* sang with it. Even when his increasing weight made his fingers too heavy for the keys. Even after Shiela had half-led him to his cabin, the planetary symphony thundered on.

WHEN she shook him awake in the dusk of another day, the girl said, "The tomatoes are all gone. From now on, we starve."

"Then I must make the supreme test tonight," Percy said. "Tonight, or never, I must really talk to them. Tell them we meant no harm. Explain that we need food and help in getting home. Say that I will return and teach them more. Ask them to release the others."

"But how, Percy? How?"

"I—don't know." His heart ached as he saw how pale and thin she had become. "I thought maybe I could do it with a homophony."

"Homophony?"

"Yes, dear. That's the instrumental music developed during the last three centuries—the music perfected by Sobietzky on Earth, Trantor on Mars, and Susurra on Venus. It has one supreme melodic part with an harmonic accompaniment. It almost talks, if one has ears."

"I know. But homophony on an accordion!" She looked at him, her great eyes filled with tears. "You need a hundred instruments. You need a theremin, a trautionium and several electrophones. It's impossible!"

"I can only try." He shrugged thin shoulders.

Her heart went out to him as he took his pitiful "squeeze-box" from its hook and edged, crabwise but valiant, down the sloping corridor.

This night, as they took their places on the landing platform, the fields were hushed though a good breeze already had risen. By the starshine they could see the three explorers, also silent in their accustomed places. They looked scarcely human, now.

Percy stepped forward briskly, as though the ramp were a podium bathed in the glare of a dozen spotlights. He rapped the railing sharply.

A sigh went through the cane, like that with which Terrestrial audiences are said to have greeted the immortal Toscanini.

He started with an uncomplicated but melodic symphony—Sibelius' "Finlandia"—and, despite the lack of rehearsals and the limitations of his instrument, he completed it.

He even got through Shostakovich's Twelfth to the satisfaction of the Jonahans, who broke into an involuntary thunder of wild chords at the close. But halfway through Trantor's "Hymn to the Galaxy" he went to pieces and the homophony dribbled away into silence.

He tried again, teeth clenched and

face ghastly white. But even his expert fingers could not turn an accordion into an electronophone and the Jonahans did not understand enough to help. He broke off in the middle of a bar, hurled the instrument from him and lunged for the door.

"Wait!" Shiela threw herself on him. "You can't quit. Think of Rick, Fritz and Itchy out there. Think of yourself and what this means to all music lovers everywhere. Think of me. I have faith in you."

"I can't," he choked. "You were right. I need an orchestra."

"You have one. There never was another like it!"

"How can I tell them what I want, with that silly thing?"

"Take it!" She pressed the accordion into his hands. "Try once more—or I will hate you, the very stars will hate you!"

Obedient as a child, he resumed playing. And this time something of Tranter came through, some part of the vast dream he had had of the stars and their peoples singing and working together throughout the millennia in proud brotherhood. It came through blurred and faint, like something seen fluttering inside an alabaster box held to the light, or as some of the majesty of the Aurochs was caught when a cave-man scratched its image on a wall with a charred stick.

When the song ended there was no acclaim. The cane merely waited, puzzled, tense, and somehow angry.

"I failed! They don't understand." Percy slumped against the hull, fumbled abstractedly for a cigarette and quoted: "*Ta me reidh leat go ndean-tar damh combra caol!* I am done with you until a narrow coffin be made for me!"

Again he was ugly, Shiela thought bitterly, ugly and frustrated as Satan.

"Let me try." She picked up the forgotten music box at last.

"You?" He tried to laugh. "Go ahead, then. Finger it like a piano. Never mind the bass. And remember—you're a contralto, not a coloratura."

FOR LONG moments she stood, her fine head thrown back, gazing out over the impatient fields. Then her fingers began to move hesitantly. This was no attempt at homophony—only a simple melody more than five hundred years old.

Percy stared, as though the ghost of Blind Rafferty had risen before him. He did not heed the pain when the forgotten cigarette burned his fingers.

And she sang, as once she had dreamed of doing at La Scala and the Metropolitan. Gravely, she sent her voice ringing bell-like across the plains. And her simple words carried with them the traditions, longings and aspirations of the race of man.

"Mid pleasures and palaces, tho' we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home. . . ."

"Trite," he thought, reaching out a hand to snatch the box from her. And yet, the words were evoking pictures of the red-berried rowan trees and the booming surf of Antrim Glen under his closed eyelids. Perhaps, please God, even an alien intelligence would glimpse the message.

"A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world is ne'er met with elsewhere. . . ."

On and on she went, tearing her lonely heart out through the last plaintive reprise:

"Home. Home. Sweet, sweet home!
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home!"

They felt the tension and the questioning ease as she collapsed, sobbing, against the side of the ship.

Out in the brake, three frightened explorers started a lumbering run toward the ramp.

In the 'ponics, though they did not know it, the wilted cane rustled and straightened into new life.

"You did it, Mavourneen." Percy took the trembling girl in his arms and
(Concluded on Page 161)

THE TIME CAVE

By WALT SHELDON

*Tremayne was angry when
he discovered the
skeleton was
not a fossil—but
the man who went
with him had
another idea. . . .*



A skeleton was propped against the wall

I'VE only met one scientist who really matched the general public's idea of the breed. And at that he was perhaps a little more ruthless about it all than you'd expect a scientist to be. He ate, slept, walked, talked science—and he had been known to divorce wives and deny children on account of it.

It was Tremayne who took me to that cave in the Sandias near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Tremayne is not his real name of course—he still teaches at a Southwestern University. As we struggled up the cliffs he kept up a long dissertation on the essential desirability of the atom bomb.

"Of course thousands were killed, suffered. And it will happen to more. But, for Pete's sake, man, the thing lifts us out of barbarism. We're *really* on the way to knowing about the Universe, now!"

I found it difficult to answer him, because his rebuttal would always include

things like the speed of light and Kepler's law and quantum physics and what-not. Debate-wise, that stymied me. He was an anthropologist himself but he discussed anything from psychosomatic medicine to the use of garlic in salad dressing with tremendous assurance. And, for all I know, with knowledge.

We came upon a cave mouth presently and Tremayne said, "This is the place."

We were very high and on a ledge along the face of the cliff. We had parked the car far below at the crest of the long slope that rises eastward from Albuquerque and is called locally "the Mesa." We entered the cave-mouth, stooping to do so, Tremayne first. The passageway had room for one man at a time. It seemed to me to slope downward a bit.

"There's a complete skeleton in there," Tremayne was saying. For all his thin grayness he moved through the narrow passage with a kind of cat grace. "None of this arrowhead or potsherd stuff. He may be Sandia man himself for all I

know. There are some queer artifacts around him and I've got to study them further."

Tremayne had been to the cave once before and had discovered the skeleton. He had been tempted sorely to stay all night and study it, but had neither the food nor the water to do that and then find his way back safely.

Hunters and prospectors who tried such things had been hopelessly lost and never found among these Sandia cliffs and foothills—almost within sight of Albuquerque. I could easily see that this skeleton of his would give him an international reputation and clear up all the unknown things about Folsom and Sandia man and maybe a few others.

"Hope nobody else has been here since I have," he said as he moved on. "By heaven, if I found some fool climber or prospector trying to disturb that thing in there—I'd kill him."

He would, too. He'd do it and then point out how insignificant one human life was compared to the march of man's knowledge—one or a thousand.

THE dust rose in the cave then and choked us a bit. I turned and saw that by the light of the cavemouth behind us the dust was yellow. It made the light somehow semi-opaque—something of the effect you see in arty photographs of the Hungarian countryside. Very unreal, I felt. Then we made a turn and it became darker and Tremayne's flashlight shone, probing the way ahead of us.

Just a moment after that we passed through the thing I can't quite describe. Through it, or over it, or beyond it—whatever it was. As much as anything it was a *sensation*. It was like suddenly coming upon an unanticipated step in the dark—except that there wasn't really any step. The floor of the cave remained relatively smooth.

But I know this—we went through or over something.

"Did you feel that?" I asked Tremayne.

"Yes, I felt something," he said. He spoke impatiently. "An illusion, I sup-

pose, springing from anxiety. You feel the same sort of thing the first time you enter a coal mine, for instance. It seems you're plunging down, and down when you're really going level."

Tremayne always had a logical explanation for everything.

Then, abruptly, we were in a vault-like chamber, roughly the size of a small bedroom. A skeleton was partially propped against its opposite wall—staring at us. I had the feeling that it saw us, and quietly hated us—but then I'm just a University public relations man, not a scientist.

Tremayne unquestionably had no such feeling.

He walked right over to the skeleton and knelt beside it. "By heaven," he said, "we'll explode a lot of theories today."

He began to measure, using screw-adjusted calipers. He made notes. He worked very carefully and I could see that he was checking each operation several times. I sat down across from him and lighted a cigarette and watched. Around me, in the dust of the cave floor, there were scattered shards and arrowheads and implements and things and I examined some of these idly.

I could recognize the shape of most but one piece had me stumped. It was like a small automobile engine valve, except that it was made of stone. It could have been a two-inch model of a circular birdbath. At the end of the shaft a small hole had been drilled—as though it might be an ornament and the hole for a neck thong.

I was still glancing at this, wondering about it, when I heard Tremayne swear.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It doesn't make sense," he said. "It doesn't add up. I might have known it. And of all the filthy breaks—"

"You mean this isn't Sandia Man, or whatever?"

"Heck, no!" he said. "This one's cephalic index is seventy-five and the capacity almost one thousand five hundred c.c. The rest of the skeleton's the same way. I should have known from the arrowheads—they're much too modern. Better designed than Indian points even.

Although they're of stone—which is queer enough.”

I frowned and asked, “Do you mean this skeleton *isn't* an old one?”

“Scientifically speaking,” said Tremayne, “this man is just as modern as you and I. We've wasted the afternoon.”

And perhaps we had.

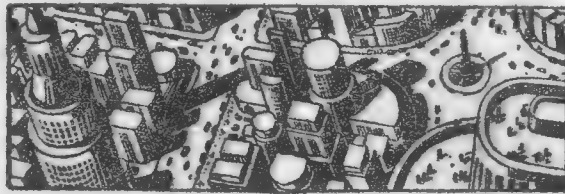
But since I'm not a scientist—and not restricted to mere logic in my thinking—I've been able to develop a theory. I can't check it, since I can't find the cave again and Tremayne refuses to look a third time.

He won't even listen when I try to tell him about the little stone birdbath

thing I saw and suggest that its shape was that of a mushroom, the shape of Alamogordo and Bikini. He snorts when I say that the thing we went *over* or *through* in the passageway might have been a time fault, a kind of warp that took us into the future. He says I read too many science-fiction stories.

But I have my theory. The man whose skeleton we found—the one who presumably worshipped a bit of stone and hunted primitively with the bow and arrow and cooked in clay pots—he was—well, do you dare hear me say it?

All right—I think that man was your great-great-great-great grandson.



Wonder Oddities

WHAT'S the most rapid-growing part of the human body? Our hair, which grows at the rate of .017 inch every 24 hours, about half an inch per month and better than six inches per year. The rate of growth, however, is not constant after the early stages of growth. Second in line is our nails, which grow at the rate of .0047 inch daily.

OUR most powerful operating electric motor was built in the United States during the war. Installed at a Utah steel mill, it is capable of hoisting a 10,000 ton cruiser out of the sea to a height of 150 feet in approximately one minute. The 7,000 horsepower motor is being used, as it was during the war, to produce steel plates from slabs weighing 20,000 pounds.

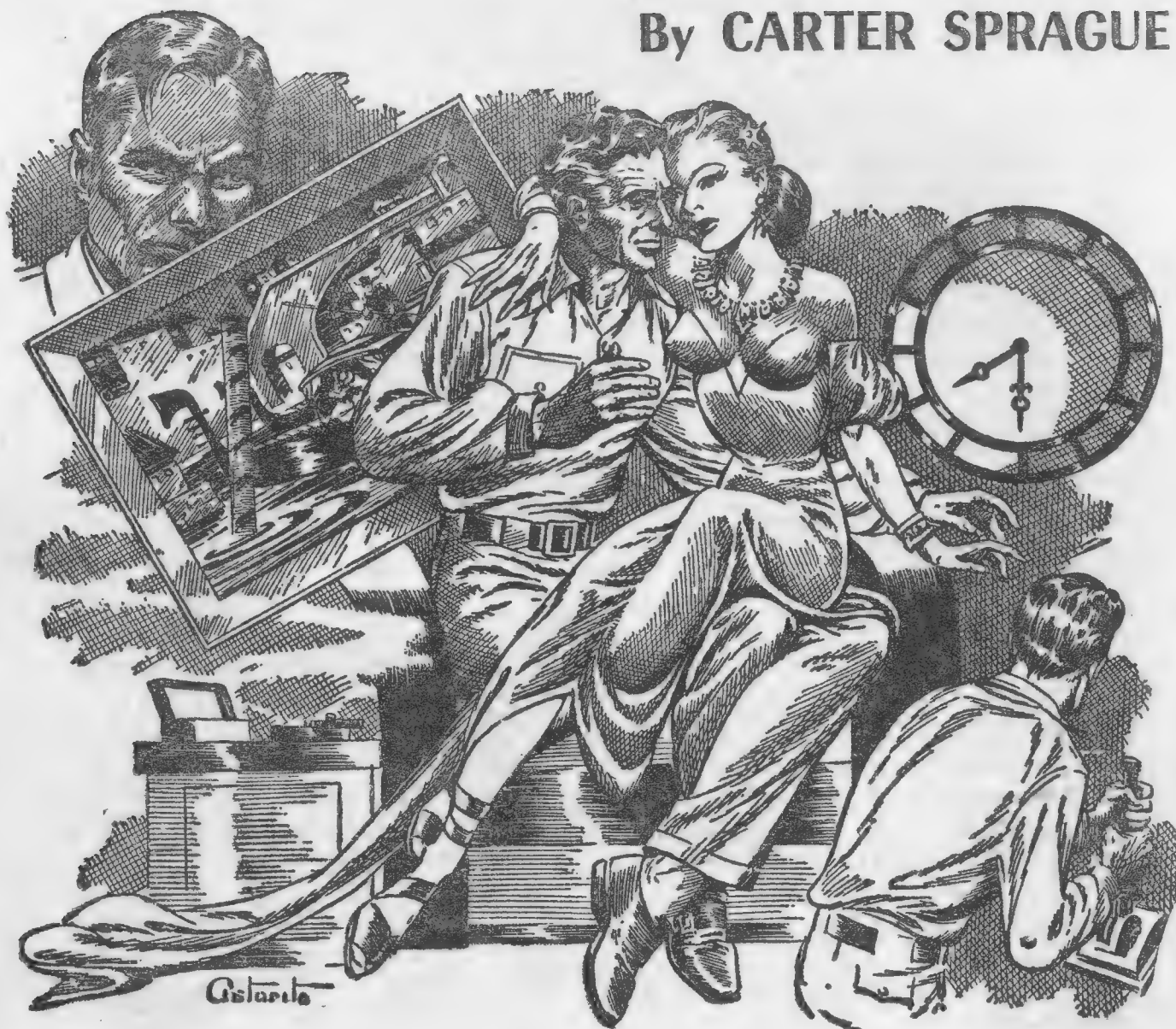
NOW invisible glass is being made by depositing single layers of molecules on a glass or metal surface. The reflections are thus destroyed and the glass becomes invisible. Some companies are manufacturing a glass so thin that it equals gold leaf and also a thick, heavy glass that approximates the tensile strength of steel, though weighing somewhat less.

DURING the development of American jet-propelled planes, the secret was kept secure within a limited circle of about one hundred people, although the planes were being built over a period of thirty months by a great manufacturing company employing 190,000 persons. The inventor, British Flight Commander Frank Whittle, spent three and a half months with the company helping the American designers, but only six persons knew he was here.

EMPLOYING a new and mobile two million volt X-ray unit, Doctor Ernest E. Charlton of Chicago, chief designer of the apparatus, can take X-ray pictures through a foot thick steel wall. The new machine photographs 78 times more rapidly than its predecessor, the one million volt type.

REALIZING the caloric and vitamin contents of various grasses, jobless science teacher Charles F. Schnabel fed these to his family of six at a cost of about twelve cents a day. The family has now been eating grass for better than a dozen years and it has apparently improved the health of each member of the family in every way.

By CARTER SPRAGUE



the Borghese Transparency

AT twenty-eight minutes after eight o'clock on the evening of June Eleventh, 1961, John Alfredo Bent appeared to be perfectly sane. He sat at ease in his usual big chair in the plate-glass and glass-brick living room of his fabulous sun-heated house. He was enjoying his after-dinner coffee and cigar and chatting with Grace Hallam, his secretary, and Lars Nordmann, his colleague.

With the wit and brilliant fancy

which, coupled to his amazing inventive faculties, had gained him the title of infant terrible of American science, he was amusing himself and his companions by a theoretical application of atomic power to golf balls. He appeared to have entire control of his faculties.

"Theoretically it should be possible," he said, his lined but still-handsome face giving no hint of the absurdity he was evolving in the course of his monologue, "to make the rounds of even old

Can a Work of Art be a Formidable Foe?

St. Andrews in exactly eighteen shots. If we were to apply directional control to the ball through the clubhead . . ."

His voice trailed off and he paused to glance at the platinum watch on his left wrist. Without a word he put down his demitasse on the table at his elbow, laid his half-smoked panatela in the tray at its side. Then, swiftly, he got to his feet and strode from the room, leaving the others staring after him.

"What in the world happened?" said Grace Hallam, half rising from the sofa on which she was seated. She was an alert, intelligent young woman. Her horn-rimmed harlequins could not hide the attractiveness of her features any more than her simple tailored dress could conceal the opulent curves that lurked beneath it.

"Let him go," said Lars Nordmann. He smiled faintly and stirred his coffee. "Inspiration may have struck."

"I've worked for John for three years now," the girl said evenly, a line of worry appearing vertically between her brows, "but I've never seen him act like that. He seemed to forget we were here. He forgot what he was saying. I don't like it."

"He's been doing the work of three men," said Lars Nordmann soothingly. He was tall, thick set, silver blond, spoke with a trace of Swedish accent. "Perhaps—" He shrugged slightly.

"I don't like it," the girl repeated, her face setting in a mold of determination. "I'm going to see what he's doing. He turned toward the passage to the laboratory."

SHE left the room swiftly, gracefully. Nordmann looked after her a moment, then shook his head ever so slightly.

She was just in time, as she entered the long corridor that led from the house to the only privately owned atomic laboratory in the United States, to see the thick metal door at its far end slide slowly shut. For some reason panic surged within her. Her running feet echoed sharply from walls and roof of the corridor.

It took her fifteen seconds to manipulate the machinery that reopened the door. She darted through it and onto the balcony that surrounded the great sealed chamber which extended far underground. She was just in time to see John Alfredo Bent stepping purposefully from the lowest steps onto the laboratory floor. He was moving purposefully toward the control room.

"John!" she cried, flinging herself recklessly down the steel staircase in pursuit. "John—what are you doing?"

He gave no sign that he had heard her. His footfalls continued in measured tread toward the control chamber door. She was panting from fright and exertion when she reached the floor and raced after him around the great cinder-block structure which hid the plutonium pile and contained its deadly radiations.

Upon the control of the pile depended three solid years of work on the most important application of atomic power to transportation since its first use, in 1957, in seagoing vessels. Between what lay locked within the pile and behind the brilliant forehead of John Alfredo Bent rested most of man's immediate hopes of applying the atom to flight in the air, to space flight.

His hand was on the lever that would stop it, shut it off, destroy all that labor and all these hopes, when she followed him into the control chamber. And though it didn't register until later her employer was humming softly to himself—of all things, "O, sole mio!" She flung herself on him like a tigress, tugging him clear, almost shrieking at him in her desperation.

Suddenly he seemed to shudder. He withdrew his grip on the lever, began to duck Grace Hallam's assault. "Hey!" he shouted. "What are you trying to do? Cut it out, Grace. I bruise easy."

Sensing his normality, she stopped. She gasped for breath, her face flushed, then said, "What are you doing? Are you trying to destroy everything you've been working for?"

He looked at her oddly. Something like fear flashed into his dark brown

eyes. "What am I doing?" he asked. He looked around him, seemed surprised at his surroundings. "Good Lord—what am I doing?" He glanced at his watch. "Eight-thirty. Why, it seems—"

"Just two minutes," said Grace Hallam. "What happened?"

"Suppose you tell me," said John Alfredo Bent quietly. She did so. He listened in silence, then shook his head.

"Apparently," he told her, "I have a great deal to thank you for. I wish I could understand it. I've had moments of wanting to spoil this whole blasted business—moments when I've been fed up enough with politicians and generals and airmen and FBI men and admirals. Those moments were when things haven't gone right."

"But you haven't wanted really to wreck it," said Grace.

"How can I tell?" he said helplessly. "Lars has warned me about overdoing things. But they're all so impatient to have us succeed. I'd better lock myself up until I can see a psychiatrist."

"How did it happen?" she asked him again. "There must have been something, some specific reason, or you wouldn't have acted this way."

He stared at the dial of his wrist-watch. "It seems silly," he said, "but somehow the time seems important. Eight-thirty. And I rested for an hour in the library this afternoon."

"I know how you rest," gibed the girl. "You don't."

"Honestly, I rested today. I actually fell asleep and Lars had to wake me up. I was looking at that picture he bought me and . . ." His voice faded and there was sudden light in his eyes. "It's impossible!" he muttered. "It has to be. But just the same, it can't be!"

"What is it?" Grace Hallam asked, trying to match her long strides to his longer ones as he strode from the laboratory.

"I've remembered about the time," he said. "It lights up in a tower along the grand canal. But it doesn't make sense."

"You're telling me," she said derisively but he didn't bother to answer.

He was gaining on her as he walked back along the corridor to the house, and she broke into a sort of half trot. He cast a purposeful glance into the living room, which was empty, as he passed, then went on to the other wing where the library was.

THE picture was not large and it was very old. It rested face up on the library table, serene and old-world and not especially colorful beneath the glass of its frame. It was an old mezzotint of Venice, early Eighteenth Century in period, obviously an authentic antique of more amusement than artistic value.

"You were looking at that?" said Grace Hallam, disappointed.

He nodded. "It doesn't look like much this way, does it?" With quick incisive motions he held it up to the light so that they could both look at it. The girl gave a gasp of surprise.

With the light behind it the picture came unexpectedly to life. The windows in the buildings had been picked out and were backed with thin yellow paper so that it looked as if they were lighted. There was the clock in the tower, its hands pointing to eight-thirty. There were Venetian cavaliers and their ladies, strolling on the bridges or the embankment or lounging languorously and amorously in silken-lined gondolas.

And there, more ominously, was a man engaged in the foreground in pushing the lever which operated a drawbridge whose pier resembled uncannily the atomic pile in the laboratory. They stared at the detail of the picture, then at one another.

"It's a Venetian transparency," he told her. "But you don't for a moment suppose that it influenced me?"

"A self-operating hypnotic picture with a post-hypnotic suggestion built in?" said the girl. "It doesn't seem possible. But you say Lars gave you this—and he has been talking about your being in danger of a breakdown. John, did he ever actually suggest that you might imperil the work?"

"Well, no," said the scientist, running

long strong fingers through his hair. "That is, he didn't actually come right out and suggest that. Of course not! It's silly. Why should he? I must have done this to myself. I tell you, Grace, I'd better get into town and see a good psychiatrist—and quickly."

"I don't think you need a psychiatrist," said the girl. "Besides, if you need one I have a degree myself. You're as sane now as you were the day I came to work—which may not be saying a lot but should pass you. You *like* your work, even if you have an occasional little-boy craving to bust it to pieces."

"No, John," she went on, shaking her head, "it isn't you. Somehow this—this transparency hypnotized you. I'd like to know more about it—and other things."

She picked up the picture, turned it over, examined it from all sides and angles. Then she began to work the paper loose from the back of the frame. Moments later she had the transparency clear of its mounting. She studied it, noted that the copperplate writing at its bottom stated that it had been executed by a Carlos Mendozzi for the Contessa Borghese in Rome in 1722.

"I seem to remember," she said thoughtfully. Then her expression hardened with decision. "John, I want you to be careful. I'm going to fly to New York tonight."

"Be careful?" he asked, bewildered. "Of course I'll be careful. But you—what has New York to do with this?"

"They have a Public Library there," she told him. "It has a very complete collection of prints and information about them." She paused, added, "I'd like you to drive me to the airport. And you could stay in town and meet me when I get back."

"You're afraid of something—for me," said John Alfredo Bent. He studied her, then permitted himself a smile that made ten years disappear. "Very well, Grace. You seem to be running my life anyway. And I no longer seem to be able to run it myself."

"Don't be an idiot, John," she said severely. "I'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

"What about Lars?" he asked. She regarded him evenly for a moment and there was an odd note in her voice when she replied.

"I'll see that he is fully informed," she said.

She made him sign in and leave his suitcase in the town's one half-decent hostelry before she would allow him to drive her to the airport. There she was able to purchase a ticket on the eleven o'clock plane to New York City.

"I'd come with you," he told her, "if I thought you wanted me to. But frankly, I'm a little scared."

"You should be," she told him, "but not of yourself. O-ho! Here comes my plane. Good-bye until tomorrow, John. Please wait for me here in town. I'll wire or phone when I'm coming back."

There was no mistaking the tone of her final words. They constituted an order.

HE was pacing the airport ramp impatiently when her DC-8 came roaring in to its landing shortly after four o'clock the following afternoon. He grabbed both her hands in greeting with an enthusiasm which caused her to look at him strangely from the shelter of her harlequin glasses.

"I called the house this morning," he said excitedly. "It seems that Lars has packed up and left."

"What else could he do?" she countered. "I left a note suggesting he do just that."

"You did what?" he all but shouted. "Grace, I appreciate the loyalty you have shown in my behalf but don't you think this is just a trifle high-handed?"

"Perhaps," she said, a faint smile tilting the corners of her lips. "But it was the only way, believe me."

He was so steamed up about Nordmann's departure that he forgot entirely to ask her what she had learned in New York. He drove them back to the house-laboratory at the highest speed his tricycle-car could achieve, almost forcing its teardrop body out of shape in the air resistance he built up by his haste.

When they reached the house a gray-haired gray-faced man of iron visage—John's laboratory chief—was awaiting them. He handed his employer an envelope, addressed to John in Lars Nordmann's Gothic handwriting. It had not been opened. John ripped the envelope apart and scanned it with growing disbelief. Grace Hallam, watching his expression, turned a most unusual pink. Finally her employer handed it to her. It read:

Dear John—This is a highly difficult letter to write, containing as it does a most unscientific confession which reflects little credit upon Lars Nordmann—in fact, quite the reverse. John, in return for the many favors you have shown me over recent years, I have attempted to do you great harm, perhaps irreparable harm. And, oddly enough, the cause of my defection is the source of my undoing. Its name is Grace Hallam—yes, your secretary.

This, I know, is deplorably unscientific—but I have fallen in love with Miss Hallam. I have declared myself to her repeatedly but to no avail. Her interest is focused entirely in her work—and, I suspect, in you, John. This I could endure if you showed yourself to be aware of her in any way save as the most efficient of all your machines. But you have never, I suspect, looked at the woman beneath the secretary facade. Perhaps, unless this letter should awaken you, you never will. You are a fool, John.

Feeling as I have felt this past year it is not, perhaps, strange that I should attempt to do you harm. And fate, in the form of that picture, coupled with your well-buried but very real desire to knock down your own house of cards, has virtually forced me to do as I have done. Had I not happened to see the mezzotint transparency in a Third Avenue antique shop window on my last trip to Manhattan, had I not happened to know something of its history—but by this time you, or at any rate Miss Hallam, knows the truth.

For attempting to destroy the work of three years I am sorry. For attempting to destroy you, perhaps both as a man and a scientist, I am not, John. It is highly doubtful that you will ever see me again—but should our paths cross at some meeting of scientists, I promise to keep well away from you for both of our sakes. Good-by, John;

Lars Nordmann

Grace Hallam looked up to find John Alfredo Bent studying her with a not so faraway look in his eye that caused her color, already unusually high for her, to become near-crimson. She handed him back the letter and her gaze could not meet his frank appraisal. She did not dare face what she might find there.

"Is this true?" he asked her. "Has

Lars been making—I mean, has he been annoying you, Grace?"

"Well, not exactly," she replied but there was no doubt of the weakness of her denial. John Alfredo Best cleared his throat.

"Letting that go for the moment," he said, "I still don't see how this hypnotism business was accomplished."

"Come," she said, leading the way toward the library. "I'll show you. I found the information I wanted in New York."

"For Pete's sake, what is it?" he asked irritably.

"Sit down—there, where you sat when you rested yesterday," she said. "I want this to be clear."

GRACE HALLAM walked over to the table and picked up the dismembered picture and frame which still lay there while her employer grumblingly sat down in a chair that faced one of the room's wide windows.

"The first of these prints," she said, holding it up and studying it carefully, "was designed by Carlos Mendozzi for a very—well, romantically inclined Roman contessa in early Eighteenth-Century Rome. Very well—but according to rumor the man who plotted the picture was a Dr. Ariosto, who seems to have been the mentor of Cagliostro, the charlatan who won fame a generation later."

"The hypnotist fellow!" exclaimed John Alfredo Best. "I'll be hanged!" Comprehension began to come into his eyes.

"Right," she said calmly. "It seems the contessa was suffering from unrequited love for a cavalier who was afraid of her husband's vengeance. So, when he fled to Venice to escape her charms, she consulted Ariosto, who suggested the transparency and designed it cunningly to force the reluctant cavalier to succumb to her."

"She followed him to Venice, planning to show him the picture and hypnotize him into falling for her. Apparently she or some other woman with a jealous husband was successful, for

the man in question, shortly after, was found floating in one of the canals, suffering from violent death."

"And Lars got hold of the picture?" said Bent.

"He got hold of one of them. Mendozzi ran off more than a hundred before the Contessa's husband managed to bring Papal pressure upon him to stop the presses. And Lars made a couple of changes to suit his own purposes."

She plucked at the print and pulled from its surface a bit of old paper which had been pasted on. Then she held it once more against the window for him to look at. The man pushing the lever to work the drawbridge was gone, as was the structure which resembled the atomic pile.

"When I saw another copy in the library," she said, "I realized what Lars had done."

Instead of bridge and bridge worker, in the foreground was a gondola. It contained a beautiful woman, obviously offering her lips to a lover concealed by the cabin of the boat. Bent looked at it for a long moment, then mopped a brow that was suddenly hot.

"Er—suggestive, isn't it?" he said uncomfortably.

"Very," she said. "I want you to sit here and study it once more. It's important that we know whether this was what really affected you so strangely yesterday evening."

"I see what you mean, Grace," he said. "Very well."

AT twenty-nine minutes past eight o'clock on the evening of June twelfth, 1961, John Alfredo Bent appeared to be perfectly sane. He sat at ease in his usual big chair in the plate-glass and brick living room of his fabu-

lous sun-heated house, enjoying his after-dinner coffee and cigar and chatting with Grace Hallam, his secretary.

Miss Hallam, who had never looked more lovely in a simple but alluring blue hostess gown with her red-brown hair falling softly to her shoulders, appeared to be concealing a restlessness. She kept glancing at the clock on the far wall, as if unable to endure the slowness with which its hands moved.

"Something troubling you, Grace?" asked John Alfredo Bent, interrupting a highly brilliant discussion of the possible application of atomic energy to shaving. Even as he spoke the clock chimed the half hour.

Bent picked up his cigar, which was half smoked, and went on with his conversation. Grace Hallam seemed to crumple before his eyes. And then, suddenly, her eyes glazed. She rose from her chair and crossed the room toward him, slowly but with the definite purpose of the sleepwalker. Her arms went around his neck tightly and she sank onto his lap as her lips met his fiercely, possessively.

Moments later she came out of it with a little gasp of alarm. She sought to pull herself clear of him but his arms tightened about her, refused to let her go.

"John," she cried, her voice thick with emotion and shock. "John, what's happened? What am I doing here?"

"That's easy," he said, kissing her again. Then, later, "You didn't think I'd let that bloody picture hypnotize me twice, did you, honey?" he asked.

"But what about me?" she said helplessly.

"You forget," he told her. "You've been looking at it most of the day."

"Oh, John," she said softly and the rest of her words were buried by his kiss.



The sorceress Priscilla arises from the ancient dust in **THE LADY IS A WITCH**, featured novel by Norman A. Daniels in the gala March issue of —

STARTLING STORIES

NOW ON SALE—25c AT ALL NEWSSTANDS!

THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 9)

ity something quite different from any pen on the Earth George knows.

Rena, herself, he learns to his astonishment and horror, is also in reality something quite different from any other girl on the Earth George knows. She is actually a student from 2,600 years in the future, sent back in time to do research for a thesis on the Earth of today.

The "pen" is actually a device attuned to the pattern of her thalamus which enables her to write down her thoughts almost as fast as they occur to her. In her love for George and in direct violation of the conditions of her trip through time, Rena tells him the truth.

It is vital to her that George come with her to her own time, there to overcome through his personal charm and ability opposition to their match which has arisen among those futurefolk upon whose affection she most depends. In short, she wants him to meet the family.

He does—and from then on the suspense in this remarkable story, to say nothing of its emotional depth, grow with every page, with every paragraph. The lovers are tricked and separated by a gulf whose passage seems beyond the possibilities even of the amazing era from which Rena stems.

This is a story whose pseudo-scientific brilliance should attract irresistibly worshippers of "heavy science" stories, whose characterization and romantic poignance should draw readers who prefer "story" to pseudo-science, whose sheer drama should attract all. We're proud of this one.

Following Mr. Jones' brilliant opus in the June long-story parade comes a hard-hitting short novel by Cleve Cartmill, **NO HIDING PLACE**, which is the grand finale of the space-salvage series which has been running in this magazine for almost a year.

Once again, Jake Murchison and Company, in difficult amorous and professional collaboration with the beauteous Captain Helen Wall, are seeking to beat Solar Interplanetary to the hiding place of Phamign's formula for herculium, the metal which can either open up a Utopia for space-traveling humanity or, in the wrong hands, reduce it to bondage to Solar.

Once again Oliver Clayborn, Machiavelian agent for Solar, is out to prevent them from getting it and never has he been in better form than when the hiding place is finally spotted on the bizarre planetoid,

Corfus, home of some of the eeriest monsters ever to bug their eyes.

This is pseudo-scientific space opera at its hard-hitting best—a thrill for those who like its type and joyous relaxation for those who occasionally run to subtler forms of the medium. It is an ingeniously well-built and swift-moving story of future-science in the star-fields rather than the laboratories. We're all for it.

Totally different in mood and development from either of these stories is Raymond Z. Gallun's new long novelet, **COFFINS TO MARS**, which makes our June issue at least a three-star affair where the more full-bodied efforts are concerned.

COFFINS TO MARS is a tale of time to come—perhaps not so many years away as sociologists measure time—when humanity, its lifetime lengthened by many decades if not to immortality, is forced to face the problem of what to do with its aged

A man named Carl Roland, a leading figure in the discovery of a rejuvenation process known as "Vita," which relieves men's bodies of the encroachments of age without lightening their spirits, thinks he has the answer. He wants to take overaged humans in large groups—put into catalepsy through a sort of sealed-in deep-freeze process—to Mars, there to use their piled-up wisdom and rejuvenated muscles to pioneer settlement of that difficult planet.

Rube Jackson and his devoted wife, Joanie, are among the oldsters who, feeling their work and usefulness on Earth is done and aware of the growing resentment among younger folk against them, volunteer for the project. And Rube and Joanie are two of the most fascinating, most real and most utterly "different" characters science fiction has known in many a moon.

They make the trip—and discover that transplantation to a new planet is one of the most heart-rending experiences ever experienced by humans, that the omniscient Carl Roland is guessing as desperately as the rest of them, that the emotional and physical problems of rebuilding shattered lives on Mars are apparently insuperable.

It is character—character against an immense human problem—that makes **COFFINS TO MARS** a great story. In some ways it reminds us of some of Ray Bradbury's justly celebrated Mars stories—but Mr. Gallun, it seems to us, has given us one of the bigger yarns so many of us have

been waiting for Ray B. to write.

Short stories—yes, of course. The line-up is as all-star as ever in this vital portion of the magazine. And the features and departments will be as usual—which is to say the best that we can make them. June looks strong for TWS.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

AND now, having waded through the above, let's at the ever-amazing issue from the weary mailman's overflowing pouch. With three shorties first—the opener being anything but saccharine in tone, to wit—

EDGY

by Richard Dickey

Dear Sir: Having grown sick and tired of the untrimmed edges on TWS and SS I make this suggestion—since it would cost too much money and paper (so the feeble excuse runs) to trim all sides, why not trim the right-hand side, leaving the top and bottom edges untrimmed? This card may do little good but I feel like trying.—901 South 19th Street, Fort Smith, Arkansas.

We thought it was about time *that* one turned up again. Oh, brother! Just for that we *won't* trim them, so there. ...!

OH, BLISH!

by J. T. Oliver

Dear Ed.: I thought LET THE FINDER BEWARE was the best story in your December issue. A BLADE OF GRASS was next—would have been first except for its brevity. I'll bet James Blish goes places in the next year. His recent work shows a lot of improvement.

Seems you waste a lot of space by printing letters. I'd much rather have another story instead. In this ish about 12 pages were taken up by epistles. Now don't get the idea I don't like to read letters by fans—I do. Why waste good story space when we have fanzines for that purpose?

The taller size of TWS is nice, of course. It means more reading for us and more dough for the authors. How about that Bradbury novel you mentioned a few months ago?—712 32nd Street, Columbus, Georgia.

No one would more relish replacing the current marathon letter column with another hunk of fiction—but how do we know it would be a good story? Besides, when so many write in so amusingly or provocatively, what are we to do? Glad you liked Blish, Bradbury, et cetera, as well as the "taller" TWS. As for Ray B.'s novel, he hasn't written one for us yet. He's been too busy of late writing elsewhere. But his shorts keep turning up, which is far, far better than nothing at all. Incidentally, how do you like Blish's current werewolf job?

COVER LOVER

by Eva S. Firestone

Dear Editor: Thank you very much for another story by Raymond F. Jones. December TWS best issue because of three excellent tales by authors Murray Leinster, Raymond F. Jones and James Blish. "The Lonely Planet" really was wonderful plus, "The Shroud of Secrecy" a close second.

Your editorial especially interesting and TRS gave two good items for my scrapbook—Don J. Nardizzi's "Shades of Longfellow" and the letter by F. G. Hehr. Bought three extra copies of December TWS—two for overseas, one to loan out. The covers were crushed into balls and suspended in dark hallways to save on electric light bill.—Upton, Wyoming.

Okay, Eva, have your fun—but you'll be a lot safer if you keep out of dark hallways. Though perhaps you mightn't have as much fun. As for the Nardizzi-Gitchi-Goomi horror—well, that one threw us too. Gloomy, rheumy Gitchi Goomi! And now, with the printable postcards out of the way, to the longer missives. Why do so many of you call them missiles (projectiles) or missles (which don't even exist)?

AYE TO AYE

by Joe Gibson

Dear Editor: You and I haven't seen eye-to-eye on a number of things, tho I've the faintest suspicion that we're often just arguing agreeably about the same thing, with your weapons a bit sharper than mine. Take, for example, the rejections you've given my attempts to write a story. The many, many rejections. Certainly nobody will save the world from anything—at least, not without a struggle. So I'll just have to get rid of world-saving bug to ever write a good story—and not a good sermon. It's just possible that a manuscript recently delivered to a book-publishers' might do that. Just might. If they don't reject it.

But before going into a rather sharp duel with you on certain editorial statements in the Dec. TWS, I'd like to give a vote of thanks for James Blish's LET THE FINDER BEWARE. After reading EESmith, Heinlein, Van Vogt and others, who went into parapsychology with realms of pseudo-scientific nomenclature regarding subconscious planes and phases of telepathic communication, pigeonholing everything in its methodical slot, it was a surprise and relief to read a yarn dealing specifically with the subject that tossed the cataloguing aside for interesting and direct action. What's more, Blish got away with it!

And Finlay's illus for Clarke's THIRTY SECONDS—THIRTY DAYS was considerably better than anything twenty years ago. But it certainly took me back to more impressionable days when everything, everything in sf was breath-taking.

Then, in TRS, Rex Ward attempted mightily to make his point clear with a rather interesting comparison between sf and musical composition. In your rebuttal, you inferred a rather inconsiderate horse-laugh. The statements you made there are hardly worth considering as sound argument.

However, though I disagree heartily with Ward's reverence for CAPTAIN FUTURE, there is certainly something in what Rex says regarding story-length in science fiction! Consider the structure of a sf yarn—it's a dramatic story-line based on a hypothesis of scientific nature. Almost every other field of literature, including some fantasy, has merely the story-line to contend with, and the hypothesis is inferred by the setting, characters and action. The one other exception is the historical novel, wherein the hypothesis is replaced by historical fact. But this existence of a hypothesis plus a story-line in sf yarns makes it almost absolutely necessary for a good sf story to be a novelet or short novel in length!

The reason is fairly obvious. Can you think of many really interesting hypotheses which can be explained clearly in a few words? There are a few, in two categories: they're either so closely similar to the commonplace that they can be easily grasped, or they're so familiar to the general sf readers that but a few words are necessary to establish them. Take simple time-travel, for instance, without any embellishments of multiple time universes. Those hypotheses are good basis for sf short stories. But any hypothesis that tends to reach any real imaginative and exploratory depth is going to run into a considerable amount of wordage, and one of the merits of science fiction is that it does occasionally reach depths of imaginative thought and conclusion. Some enthusiasts might even substitute "constructive" for "imaginative" and I for one wouldn't argue the point.

But when a good hypothesis runs into a lot of wordage, how is it to be included in the story? It certainly isn't advisable to cram several pages of textbook-dry exposition anywhere into the story. The action, the story-line, should run steadily from beginning to climax and end, including whatever conclusive action might follow the climax. It shouldn't be broken up, either, by tossing chunks of exposition indiscriminately into the story, here and there.

What should be done is establish the action and start the story-line going and then inject bits of the hypothesis expeditiously where they will tend to explain and clarify the

action of the story. This is certainly a tedious process from the author's point of view, and involves careful planning at times to get the story's action around to sequences which will gradually allow him to inject every bit of his hypothesis. The trick is to have the story end with both the story-line or action and the basic hypothesis completely explained, with no loose ends.

That's a fact which explains why the heroes of some sf yarns have gone thru some mighty peculiar adventures. As the reader followed the wayward hero, he was continually fed bits of the basic hypothesis, bits which somehow seemed to explain these peculiar adventures. This trick of using action to introduce hypothetical details which clarify the action is a devilish thing to master, and more often fails with one reader while it succeeds with another. And sometimes it fails altogether.

But that's a fundamental problem in story construction. Where it applies to this argument is that nonetheless, the introduction of a hypothesis of any notable depth and conception in a story means a lot of extra wordage for that story. Over-padding has nothing to do with it. That's just another problem of story construction. And nine times out of ten, when some fan writes in that the stories are beginning to sound too much alike, that he wishes someone would write a "new story," what he actually means is that the hypotheses are too much alike, too similar to the hypotheses of stories in former issues. And a hypothesis is something that can be new—individual hypotheses are, in fact, as variable as individual personalities.

Where short stories generally fall flat, in science fiction, is in having shallow hypotheses which aren't thought out to any appreciable extent. Too often, the author refrains from working out the hypothesis simply because that would run his yarn right out of the short story lengths. But readers aren't dumb—far from it—and they can scent a good hypothesis which has been given brief, thoughtless and hasty treatment in the first dozen paragraphs. They immediately feel an instinctive curiosity about it, a wish that it had been thoughtfully and constructively treated. They end the story with a vague sense of being cheated. And they have been.

Of course, a good hypothesis hardly makes a good story. It takes the story to carry the hypothesis, and there's meat for much speculation as to what ratio must exist between the quality of hypothesis and the quality of story to make a good yarn. Most editors I've found, you included, consider rightly that the story is the thing—the hypothesis is merely "the idea" and if it's well-carried "there's some good writing in it."

George O. Smith likes to turn out a yarn with a good solid backlog of technical data explaining his hypothesis. When he turns out a not-so-good yarn, the data gets a bit textbookish, as happens with anyone using that style. When it's good, as in the VENUS EQUILATERAL series, a reader gets the impression that the author has actually made textbook-reading a refreshing experience! It's the story that does it.

Of course, these considerations hardly apply to common adventure yarns "dressed up" with pseudo-scientific gadgetry and palmed off as science fiction.

But they do prove, I believe, that Rex Ward had something with regard to his theories about quality-equals-length in sf stories. Can you imagine the loss of effectiveness and quality if "A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT" had been written as a mere 5000-word short? If you can't, bub, you belong in Hollywood!—24 Kensington Avenue, Jersey City 4, New Jersey.

That, friend Joe, is a mighty heavy load of something to shovel off on us so early in the proceedings. But we don't intend to let it get away—or you with it. Not without comment at any rate.

It occurs to us that there is nothing in your very fine analysis of the science fiction story which is not equally and directly applicable to the detective story, which it is currently crowding for elbow-room in the literary scene.

In your detective-mystery yarn (the relationship of detective to mystery is closely analogous to that of science-fiction to fantasy) you have a core of hard facts and gimmicks which must be carefully exposed throughout the course of your romantic-melodrama or grim-sordid-drama or adventure-melodrama, these constituting your story line. If you don't get your gimmicks

into print at the right moments you either cheat the reader entirely or wind up with an indigestible mass of explanation at the end. If you give him too much too early you kill your suspense.

Furthermore, in the good mystery-detective story you must actually develop two story lines both in synchronization and direct conflict or you wind up with nothing more than a chase. In short, your force for evil (your killer) must move as rapidly and adroitly as your force for good (your detective or hero) until the ultimate denouement. This is perhaps the most difficult balancing act in the entire profession of story-writing.

In science fiction, as you state, your scientific idea should be ever present and its depths and possibilities thoroughly explored.

However, some of the finest detective stories ever written have been brief in length—there is as much room on classic mystery shelves for the Sherlock Holmes shorts as for the master's longer efforts. And we suspect the same applies to science fiction.

A complex theorem need not be plumbed to its ultimate depths if only one facet of the problem it presents is necessary to achieve the dramatic effect intended by the author. Certainly exposition of the entire theory of free fall in space would not have enhanced the grim effectiveness of Ray Bradbury's KALEIDOSCOPE in our October, 1949, issue. Quite the contrary.

Certainly there is nothing more important to science than the Pythagorean theorem—The square of the hypotenuse of a right angle triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of its sides—or Newton's great law—The attraction between two objects is proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them.

Yet both are brief as brief can be. And, to step out of mystery and science entirely, two of the most interesting propositions of recent decades have been of the briefest nature—first, Dorothy Parker's "Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses"; second, Ogden Nash's "Candy's dandy, liquor's quicker."

Upon the above we rest our weary case—wit. thanks for a swell letter.

THIRD HORSEWOMAN by Elizabeth M. "Betsy" Curtis

Dear Editor: "Let The Finder Beware" in the December TWS fulfills completely my definition of science fiction (in spite of the fact that the definition is not yet complete and

will have to be modified to make the most of this story). Not only that, the story somehow has the tone of first-hand reporting of actual experience that makes Danny alive. The scene (pp. 53-54) with the machine has the echo of a remembered conversation, not a manufactured one. This is writing.

The rest of the issue is good, but this time I have been more interested by the letters as far as wanting to make some comment goes. I'll try to keep away from personal matters and the burning feuds that have given the Reader Speaks an occasional black eye. But I do have some things to say about the letters.

First, about Dirk Schaeffer, at whom several writers seem so irate. I am, I believe, in a particularly fine position to assure the other readers that Dirk is not and has never been a mere pseudonym for Richard Shaver. You don't have to be that much down on him. I have certain proof from a Nicki and Eunice Schaeffer which indicates to me his non-Shaverian identity. Besides, awareness of the problems of similarity of plot and/or treatment and the nature of plagiarism must be arrived at before literary efforts can be fully understood and appreciated. I can't quite bring myself to blame a college graduate for not yet having completed his doctorate—to use an analogy (Probably Dirk won't care for my defense of him).

I find I must back the third horse in the editor's race with Rex Ward, as a matter of opinion and taste. I like 15-minute sermons better than two-hour ones and find almost any of Mozart more "warm-blooded" than the sustained sonorous lifelessness of Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Really, there must be something to this taste business.

Interestingly enough, Bill Case's philosophy of at least the unknowability of absolutes seems to be shared by most of the professors of philosophy with whom I have ever talked. However, insofar as one has occasionally to make choices and to act, I find myself quite a devotee of the categorical imperative and make considerable attempt to act in line with those absolutes which a casual mode of thinking presents to me. I'd like to ask Bill how I can do any better than that, even if, for some non-casual reason I should think differently.

Condolences to Ruth Weinstein for her pocked ceiling. I guess I'm just lucky in having had no difficulty in converting my husband to sci-fiction. I don't even dare give away a copy for propaganda reasons any more for fear he hasn't re-read it for the third time.

John Van Couvering's anvenomed epistle re the unscience of "Fury" is truly impenetrating but seems to embody rather too much en-ergy for what seemed to me a rather enervated story.

Tom Pace has really hit something in his vision of strangely-colored prairies and purple skies. An evocation of the magic of never-before-felt sensations is one of the things which gives sci-fic its overwhelming appeal. Since I have no gift for creating it, I certainly lap it up in TWS.

To Alfred Kobos I should like to say that he will probably find the people who are trying to do something to make the future better right in his own block—any parents who are tea-hing or trying to teach their young 'uns the skills that make them get along better with their neighbors. Our world is still pretty much where we happen to be and not all the Null-A and Relativity Literature to the contrary can tell us whether or not to cuss out the guy who dented our fender.

Hoo-ray for your defense of women in creative art, editor, and congratulations on the extra half-inch pages. My only request would be that TWS and SS be printed monthly.—201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

Which concluding thought is enough to make us (one) bald or (two) completely white of tress. Doing two of these departments per thirty-day period, along with our other chores, would just about snow us under—and we aren't thinking of dandruff either. However, a nice sentiment.

You're so right about your third horse-spot in the Ward-Gibson versus anyone-who-will-fight-back debate. Actually it is a matter of taste. For instance, if your name were Ward and you preferred to spell it Weird—well, you might even be correct.

As for your remarks anent Blish's non-manufactured writing in December's "Let the Finder Beware"—it gives us a chuckle as well as a definite admiration toward that author's work in this instance, echoing your own.

The story was conceived out of whole table-cloth over a luncheon table many months ago in the Murray Hill district of Manhattan. Jim got to work on it and ultimately produced the short novel which roused your admiration—and ours.

But on its acceptance he confessed to us ruefully that he had never had much interest in parapsychology or its allied subjects and that boning up on it and projecting it into a story was one of the most miserable assignments he had ever undertaken. Had he admitted it during our opening conference we would of course have discarded it at once and tried to start him on something else.

And all of us would have missed a whale of a good story. So you never can tell, especially if you're writing them.

OFF-AND-ONNIVERSARY by Richard R. Smith

Dear Editor: With the printing of this letter (?), I will have been letter-hacking off and on for a whole year. On this, our anniversary, I would like to thank you for helping me lose a job. Unusual, huh? You see, I was hired on competitive basis. I took a copy of TWS to work. They saw Bergey's cover, inside illos and yours truly's stackof statements (which didn't do the trick but helped a little). Lost job; got a much better one. So, thanks.

The cover on the Dec. ish is well done. Some of Bergey's covers have a glaring effect but he did okay on this job. You know, I wish you would try to get more science on your covers. The scene on the Dec. ish and a lot of other covers could be scenes from the modern day as well as in the future.

LET THE FINDER BEWARE is Blish's best. Near the end, however, he goes back to his routine of confusing the reader with a lot of mumbo-jumbo. THE SHROUD OF SECRECY was fair. THIRTY-SECONDS—THIRTY DAYS was very good. Drama, suspense, et al. All except this rot about fying a rocket on the victim's back and shooting him out in space! Did you know the temperature of outer space is so tremendous that it can melt solid steel? What chance would the dead man's body have in the story? Also, internal pressuras would tend to explode the corpse. Morbid, what? I suppose Clarke overlooked this technicality to add drama to the story.

THE LONELY PLANET was hackery. SKIN DUPE was good. A BLADE OF GRASS showed signs of genius or something. THICKER THAN WATER was a mumbo jumbo. Is Cartmill a frustrated engineer? THE COLORFUL CHARACTER was colorful.

You seem proud of your extra half-inch length of page, your new printing job. Somehow, I liked the old size better. More compact, you know. Besides, all you do with that extra half-inch is give a wider margin at the top and bottom. The old printing job, I liked much better. Are you getting a poorer grade of paper? Don't be discouraged: story quality is improving.—6 East 44th St., Wilmington, Del.

Which should point a vital moral to one and all. If you want to get ahead in this world of ours, just take TWS to work with you and read it during office hours. Hokay, Richard, we hope this year sees you getting your stories as well as your letters in print. As to our longer page, there are three extra lines of material per column, which adds up considerable.

SECOND SHOT by D. H. Cohen

Dear Ed: I am having a second shot at writing to thee—I presume my first letter landed in the basket—the one for

waste. In my last letter I mentioned the difficulty in finding TWS and SS, a complaint, I believe, of many a fan from this side of the world. Well, I've got news, thanks to an address given by one of your readers, Mr. Parkinton of New Zealand (I guess that's the name) found in TRS.

I am now getting a fairly regular supply of TWS and SS, though not quite up to date, the latest being dated June, '49, but who worries about dates? It's getting them that counts and believe me or believe me not they're good—no, grand—no, super. Well, anyhow, they're super-super.

I have just finished the February, 1949, issue of TWS and rate "The Weapon Shops of Isher" tops, followed closely by "Assignment on Pasik." The "Orig Prem" series is really good too. "The Weakness of Ryog," "The Carriers," "The Himalaychalef" and "The Man" were good although "Messenger" was off standard.

Do you know what I'm doing with the issues I've read for purely selfish reasons? I would like to keep them, passing them around to other less fortunate sfans—there's about a dozen after them. But if I cannot oblige all—well, I'll just use the wife as a shield. (coward) or else there is going to be one less sfan. The address for Anglofans to write is Science Fantasy Service, 68 Victoria Street, Liverpool 1, England.

Well, that's all for now. Thanks for some jolly good reading and carry on with the good work.—32 Larch Street, Hightown, Manchester 8, Lancashire, England.

All in all, a picture of the tribulations and unquenchable sfenthusiasm of the Anglofans. Thanks, D. H., and please write us again.

MAKE-UP TROUBLES by Ed Cox

Dear Editor: At long last it comes the time to type (hah, tho't I was going to write "pen" didn'tyal) another letter to TWS. I didn't even see the Oct. TWS until after I returned from the Cinvention (we missed you there) and this DecTWS was late. So late in fact that I've already read most of the JanSS and can complain about something therein, except that I'm saving it for my SSletter coming shortly.

Now to the mag itself. The novel was very good, even if not strictly sffictional by the standard yardstick. By that I mean that until only recently (the last few years) the tho't that occurred to a reader when s-f was mentioned, would be something akin to—oh, say "The Lonely Planet" frinstance. But starting with Idunnohow, possibly van Vogt (or at least, most significantly), the theme is reaching the level of the Mind (as mentioned not-so-briefly by Shelby Vick in a letter to me recently).

Now in James Blish's very good effort this is taken quite well and suited more to the general public or reader than to the average sfan. Instead of some supermanoffthefuture, as in many a van Vogt epic (saga, story or whathaveyou?), a man of the present goes through that tortuous and now becoming-slightly-familiar period or experience of discovering his super-powers of the mind. In this one, it reminds me of Leinster somewhat (in his handling of the love-interest and characterization) and van Vogt in the main theme. Only the way Blish wrote it in no way seemed oldhat, so please don't worry. I'm not complaining.

The second story in Raymond F. Jones' series, again a branch-type of stf which is different from the former standard type, is as good as the first. Promises to be a good series. The way he has left the continuation thread now, it has interesting possibilities and is likely good for two or three more stories. It is also nice to see Jones writing more.

Jenkins' "Lonely Planet" was, I fear, average good "Leinster." I mean, it was interesting, idea not entirely new, written in the usual Leinster style—but not exciting or pulse-stirring as some he's written have been. Of course, he's been writing for over 20 years now, so he's doing pretty darned good to be able to hold his own over the years during the changing trends in the type of stories, styles of writing (although his remains pretty constant) and so on.

Clarke's story is quite different from his regular offerings and not quite so satisfying, since we want more of that so-wonderful kind of story like "Against the Fall of Night" or "The Lion of Comarre" or his short bits of nostalgic history.

Bradbury deviates slightly in form but the underlying mood is still there. Dramatic sorta. "Morrison" did a fair short but nothing inspiring much comment. Cartmill sounded (or read, rather) much like the Kuttner of the Kuttner-and-Barnes Carlyle-Quade Kuttner (lotta these guys named Kuttner ain't there!). Ha, I see that De Camp has dragged in the Vishnu sage here also. Pahl!

Finlay did better this issue and Astorita was fair. Stevens wasn't so hot. That does up the artwork neatly, what?

Well, yes, I did notice the zine is taller. So the half-inch gives with more wordage, huh? My profound apologies for not trusting in your infinite wisdom of the ways of a magazine. Say, you oughta explain, sometime, just how you make

all the stories fit! And ads. And letter column, reviews—artwork! How about it?—4 Spring Street, Lubec, Maine, USA, Earth, etc.

All right, we shall, and don't say you didn't ask for it. Magazine makeup remains a trouble-laden miracle to the practising editor until he becomes used to its ways and takes it for granted.

To begin with he is given the number of pages in the issue, the number of pages and half-pages given up to advertisements and the pages on which departments and stories begin in the front of the book. Then he has the cover with its listings and a list of the stories (advertised leads, series and those that have lain idle too long in inventory) which must be used.

He spots his departments and deducts the pages thus used from the total allowed for printed matter. Then he usually deducts for his lead story and the other stories which must be run. The remainder he tries to fill as tightly as possible with whatever stories and novelets he has in type, always taking care not to begin a double-spread novlet on a right-hand page—and also trying to begin as many short stories as possible on right-hand pages.

When he has it fitted he then prays that he made no stupid arithmetical errors calculated to undo all his work, that the advertising department will come up with no quick changes, and after writing any necessary "fillers" and announcements sends it on its way.

There is nothing like discovering that when the "musts" are taken care of there are 47½ pages to fill and that the only decent combinations of tales remaining in print total either 44¼ or 51 pages even. It is when this happens that you'll find three child-problem stories in one issue (yes, it happened not so long ago) or two Bradbury stories, one under a pen name (most of you will remember this one). All in all, it has a certain grim resemblance to an amputee hanging wallpaper while afflicted with the proverbial hives. It is both a knack and a headache.

SHALLOW SORCERY by William N. Austin

Dear Sir: Seems as though TWS continues to improve with each issue. Three fine stories, one might-have-been-great and four diverting fillers. Not bad—not bad at all. . . .

The sugar and salt mixture this time was Blish's lead novel. He shows nice erudition of technical material, combining successfully the better elements of science-fiction, fantasy and vestiges of the supernatural, unfolding his narrative with a mounting tension to the really effective climax. Unfortunately he has resorted to convenient devices for populating his tale. The feminine interest exemplifies this subterfuge, Marla having been conjured by the author's fancy rather than plot requirements. Rather shallow sorcery, that—like having a wizard perform card tricks.

This perpetration stands out in marked contrast to the

author's decision to utilize incidental preliminary characters as principals in the subsequent development.

Yes there were other small irritations which, together with this other business, could easily have been smoothed out to perfection with a modest revision. Nevertheless I enjoyed LET THE FINDER BEWARE as it stands.

Mr. Clarke, on the other hand, is a stylist; his THIRTY SECONDS—THIRTY DAYS attempts nothing that is incompatible with its pre-determined limits. It is a masterful character study, completely worthy of Mr. Clark, for whom I have the highest regard.

Ray Bradbury and Murray Leinster both are represented with highly effective stories, either of which could easily have rated top place in this issue if it were not for Mr. Clarke's representation. Congratulations, gentlemen!

As for the others I found a slight preference for THE COLORFUL CHARACTER over Mr. Cartmill's story, if only because of de Camp's colorful characters. Jones' novelet, a section of a series, does not stand individually as a story. SKIN DUPE was a diverting trifle—nothing more.

The ratings:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Clarke, THIRTY SECONDS—THIRTY DAYS | +2.06 |
| 2. Bradbury, A BLADE OF GRASS | 1.97 |
| 3. Leinster, THE LONEY PLANET | 1.77 |
| 4. Blish, LET THE FINDER BEWARE | 1.38 |
| 5. De Camp, THE COLORFUL CHARACTER | 1.32 |
| 6. Cartmill, THICKER THAN WATER | 1.29 |
| 7. Jones, THE SHROUD OF SECRECY | .98 |
| 8. Morrison, SKIN DUPE | .93 |

Average: 1.46

(3.00 = EXCELLENT; +2.00 = VERY GOOD; +1.00 = GOOD; 0.00 = FAIRLY GOOD; -1.00 = FAIR)

The cover? Nice color scheme—that's about all. It's impossible to understand her perturbation what with her buoyancy potential. (An excellent cover on the January STARTLING though—certainly one of the best fantasy covers of recent years.)

Interesting letters about the Vortex in The Reader Speaks. I miss the epistles of sparkling wit of a few months back, however. Keep out the deadheads like me and feature Young Genius again.—3317 West 67th Street, Seattle 7, Wash.

Where, when and what was all this effervescent mental seltzer whose evanescence you moan, Bre'er Austin? We don't recall anyone else saying anything anent it. However, if we had it and lost it we hope we soon got it again. And appreciations for your sterling rating of the December job.

OUT OF THE PAST by James McCarthy

Dear Sir: This may seem like a letter from the past but I have just finished reading THRILLING WONDER STORIES dated April, 1939. A lot of water has flowed under the bridges since then and a few events in the world that were never dreamed of except in science fiction. So I am writing this note not knowing whether or not the magazine is still in existence.

If it is I would like to know how I can obtain copies, as it is nearly impossible to get science fiction in this country. Hoping you are still going strong.—33 Cotewall Road, Bradford, Yorkshire, England.

Okay, students, give him the answer he wants to hear. As for that April, 1939, issue, let's take a look back at it ourselves, just to see what went in that so-recent yet so-long-ago period.

The issue was comparatively short on stories and long on features in comparison with its present format. Three novelets were featured—"The Jules Verne Express" by Eando Binder, "Men Must Die" by Ward Hawks (a February, 1950, Hall of Fame reprint in our companion magazine, STARTLING STORIES) and "White Barrier" by Frank Belknap Long.

Short stories were "Experiment" by Roscoe Clark, F.R.C.S. (whatever that was), "Beyond Annihilation" by Henry Kuttner,

"The Broken Axiom" (Amateur Contest winner) by Alfred Bester, "Madness from Mars" by Clifford D. Simak and "Zeoh-X" by Ray Cummings.

Special features included "Science Quiz," "IF" (picture feature) by Jack Binder and "Scientifacts" by J. B. Walter. Also listed were "Special Questions and Answers," "Special Announcement," "Science Fiction League," "The Reader Speaks," "The Story Behind the Story" and "The Swap Column."

A glance at R. C. Peterson's incredible "Speer Decimal Classification" informs us the following about the stories—

"The Jules Verne Express"—space travel, no single planet the main locale, adventures in a single ship.

"Men Must Die"—cover story, extrapolations on psychology and biology relative to men, brains in mechanical housings, heads—also space travel, pioneer flights.

"White Barrier"—oneway travel from past to future, suspended animation—also extraordinary astronomical phenomena

"Experiment"—extrapolations on psychology and biology relative to men, immortality elixir.

"The Broken Axiom"—dimensional, parallel universes, other planes.

"Beyond Annihilation"—ditto.

"Madness from Mars"—extraterrestrial life and adventures on other planets, visitations to earth.

"Zeoh-X"—extrapolations on chemistry, physics and technology, humanoid.

All in all, the space opera was evidently in full cry. Which merely serves to point up the comments of Ed Cox on the alterations in the character of the "orthodox" science fiction story. The boys really went buckety-buck in them days, bless 'em.

JUST GIVE US ONE DOZEN . . . by Ann B. Nelson

Roses for the editor!—for this December issue!—for the Blish, Leinster and Jones stories—which I have just devoured with much satisfaction! The Reader's Column, of course, I like best of all and that comes first.

The books mentioned in "Let the Finder Beware" I also have read, a fact which gave me an added thrill of pleasure in reading the story. Along that same line Blish should enjoy "A Study of Consciousness" by A. Besant.—2702 Melbourne Street, Houston 16, Texas.

We love the pretty flowers! Thanks, Ann.

THE SAGE HAD IT by Ted Powell

Read Editor: For many years now I have run across the name of Voltaire and have in all that time read only one of his ironical tales—"Candide." Last week I stumbled upon a book on this brilliant intellectual's works.

This man lived in the eighteenth century and to my astonishment I ran across a little fantasy of his called "Micromegas"—which leered at bigotry and the dim view more or less common to all men in his time. It depicts the travels of one Micromegas, citizen of a planet of Sirius, and what he encountered in our tiny solar system.

This is perhaps the earliest science fiction I have yet come across. The thought struck me that perhaps a reprint of this remarkable piece of pioneering in one of your science fiction magazines would interest your readers. I was previously under the false impression that Poe, Wells and Verne, et al. were the fathers of science fiction. Voltaire seems to have antedated them by a full century.—5719 69th Lane, Maspeth, Long Island, New York.

No, Dean Jonathan Swift was writing science fiction several decades earlier in his "Voyage to Iaputa," the airborne island,

and Sir Francis Bacon was antedating him by another full century, in his "New Utopia." And there are examples far more primeval. On the heels of Voltaire, of course, came the Gothic novels, whose moods and some of whose gadgetry survive in some present-day stf. Certainly Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" was science fiction of the android school.

However, Poe, Wells, Verne and Company were the first fantacists to use the early development of the current industrial era as a springboard for their work. So in a sense the earlier studies are not comparable from an stf viewpoint. Let us hear from some more of you on the possibility of running Voltaire, Swift and others in our magazines. We have been considering it for some time.

ENGLISH DIRGE by A. R. Searce

Dear Sir: I have been a very keen reader of THRILLING WONDER STORIES (when able to get it) and your companion magazine since I was fourteen years of age. But of late I'm afraid that my chances of getting even a British reprint have been becoming increasingly remote.

We don't have a single edition over here and the paper restrictions have put a stop to any coming over from "the other side." So I was wondering if you have any readers who could post me on any old copies of stf they may have by them.

I have been laid up in bed since December, 1948, as a result of a road accident. So you can imagine how the time does NOT pass. I have quite a few British copies I would willingly send on to any reader who could oblige me—and I'll pay postage on said mags.

I hope you won't think me begging—but I really would give a lot for a few copies—in any condition.—1 Hill Street, Reading, Berkshire, England.

We hope you are soon up and about, Mr. Searce, and that you find our fans in generous mood. Also that you will writ. again and let us know how things come out.

WHO'S A JOE? by Shelby Vick

Dear Joe,

(Don't like just "Dear Ed," so

I will call

you

Joe, this time. (Better than nothing.)

As with the last

letter

most of the important words—nouns and whatnot—are separated.

Except when they don't please

me.

The cover, by Bergey (who else?) wasn't as bad as many have

been—except for that excuse for the

feminine

gender who is clinging to the Bem.

Everything in the December ish was

good

Some were more so than others, though.

THELONELYPLANET

Good!!

THICKERTHANWATER

ABLADEOFGRASS

THESHROUDOFSECRECY

in that order, and all

good!!

Don't look now, but

Jones

has palmed a serial off on

you
LETTHEFINDERBEWARE

Good. . . I

In places, it reeked. The ending, for instance. And the guy's name. . . . Denny Kaye in s-t, yet!

SKINDUPE

THIRTYSECONDS—THIRTYDAYS

tied. Both were

good.

And all there is to say about

THECOLORFULCHARACTER

is this: That is

good?

Who,

who,

who,

is this guy

Cartmill?

Heinlein?

Or maybe

Kuttner?

TRS:

Good!!!

Or maybe even

better!

And long enough for

satisfaction.

There wasn't anything from

me

printed, but what can one expect? Didn't have anything in!

Just one last word—or so.

More

Murchison!

And is there any possibility that a sequel to the planet story

might be sneaking around in

Leinster's

mind?

Hope so.

Yes, this thing is late. Can be considered an experiment to

see if there is anything to the old adage, "Better late than

never" or, "Shoulda stood in bed—and don't

you

wish that

I

had?" Don't answer that.—Box 493, Lynn Haven, Florida.

Very wellby,

Shelby,

We won't, espec-

ially since you evident-

ly prefer us not

To—

Except to pass

Along to you the in-

Formation that

Cleve Cartmill is

Cleve Cartmill and

First appeared in

TW! in

August, 1943 with

"The Visit-

ing Yokel" and has

Sold many, many priceless

Pieces of

Prose (alleged)

To this and other

Stf magazines. O-

Kay?

TREES OF MYSTERY by Mrs. Dorothy N. Sherid

Dear Ed: In the December issue of TWS you have several letters regarding the Oregon Vortex at cetera. You might be interested to know that there is another such place on the California coast, near Bodega Bay, which is not far south of the Russian River—I forget the exact mileage.

It is called Trees of Mystery I believe. I went there a couple of years ago but have forgotten the exact name. It is close to a small beach, has a small building on it and I know by my own experience there is something definitely peculiar about the place.

In the first place I couldn't even walk across the cabin without holding on. I staggered when I tried to and bumped into everything else inside. I was never so dizzy in my life.

there is a shelf about three or four feet off the ground at one side of the cabin. You can stand on the shelf's extreme edge and lean forward at a 45-degree angle and you cannot fall.

They also have the tilted plank on which a ball rolls up to you and you cannot make it roll down. A pendulum hung from the roof beam swings to one side and there is a flat place on which two people stand and facing one another seem to change in height.

I think the thing that struck me the most were the trees. It is in quite a wooded place and all the trees inside had their limbs twisted around to point in one direction. They are good-sized trees. Another thing—the wood of the eucalyptus, which is generally white where its bark peels, is here a peculiar shade of red. Beyond the boundaries of the place the trees are normal.

There is a small hotel there and the proprietor told me that scientists from the University of California and Stanford had visited the place several times but had found nothing to explain the peculiar properties. I hope it is explained sometime for, like Kipling's baby elephant, I get "curiouser and curiouser." Needless to say I like your magazine lots and wish it came out oftener.—886 Goodmy Drive, Albany, California.

We hope so too, Mrs. Sherid—and thanks for telling about it so that we can pass it along to our readers.

Maybe one of them has the story behind these pesky vertices.

WOT, NO SANTA CLAUS?

by Wilkie Conner

Dear Editor: Here 'tis December according to the cover on the new TWS and there wasn't a Santa Claus in the whole issue. But there were some mighty good stories.

I wish I had the energy to dig out all of 1949's TWS and make comment on same, but since I don't, I'll just leave that pleasure to someone else. However, I will venture this—to my mind 1949's TWS was the best of any year. Agree?

Have you heard of The Centaurians? Seems to be a new fan club that Bob Farnham is getting up. Hear tell he has quite a few famous names on the roster, including Roy Bradbury. NFFF move over!

See that Popular Library is publishing Norman Matson's fantasy, "Bats in the Belfry." I'm all in favor of ribald humor in science and fantasy fiction and I wish you could arrange for Matson to do a novelet or even a novel for TWS in his tight devil-may-care manner. Though if he brought in even a tinge of sex the teen-age purists in the audience would probably howl to high heaven.

Gosh knows, stf could stand a lot more funny stuff. Seems like though people don't take stf seriously unless it deals with nice gentle things such as the world coming to an end via atom bombs or mankind degenerating into an un-Tarzan-like apeman.

You've published some darned good funny stuff though and managed to get away with it unscathed. (I still go into convulsions when I think of some of the ridiculous situations in What Mad Universe and Hank Kuttner's Hogben stories.)

Manly Banister's letter in TRS was a nice example of the type of letter, that I like to see in the reader's department of a mag. No juvenile drivel—no needless praise or paning of stories, authors or artists. Just a good sensible letter, interesting to the casual reader as well as the long established fan. Banister should write more often.

Speaking, as we were a few paragraphs back, of 1949 I believe you made another mile-stone in the quality line. You printed Margaret St. Clair's "The Gardener." Wouldn't be surprised to see that yarn anthologized all over.

I hope 1950 will be propitious to your going monthly. After all paper is getting more and more plentiful—and there is some hope that it will be cheaper—more people are reading stf than ever before—and your quality is now high enough to merit more frequent appearance of both TWS and SS.—1618 McFarland Ave., Gastonia, North Carolina.

We hope this year is an all-time topper too, Wilkie.

As for Norman Matson doing us a story or six—we only wish he would.

We too like his stuff. And we have never hesitated to run humor on the ribald side as long as we found it tickling to the risibilities. Remember "Devils from Darkonia" to say nothing of Sprague de Camp's recent "The Hibited Man?"

Yes, we have heard of the Centaurians
—vis below—

CENTRIPEIANS by Bob Farnham

Dear Ed: I see that five members of THE CENTAURIANS had their letters in the Reader Speaks, in the December issue. Fine! The membership lists are closed but I'll gladly pass out any information requested.

I've just finished "Let the Finder Beware" by James Bligh. Have we had this writer before? Keep him, feller, he's great! More by Bligh!

Am sure glad to note the coming "Return of Captain Future." Now! . . . if you could manage to locate Sarge Saturn and his fellow idiots, the picture would be perfect and so would the magazine! The letters on the Oregon Vortex certainly were interesting and I think that the letters of Emily Thompson and Manly Bannister tied for first choice this issue. I see Ed Cox has a letter in TRS! Tsk, tsk! From the deep silence that emanates from Lubec I thought sure someone had swiped his typewriter!

Also liked "The Shroud of Secrecy" by Raymond Jones. Got a laugh out of the cover pic. As usual the poor HEERO is almost overloaded with a decorated union suit and the gal has on just enough to avoid arrest. You didn't answer my question about the towel, either!

After being chased by an angry cow, stung by a bee and ganged up on by a family of skunks, all on a picnic, I wish I'd taken your advice and summered in the flower house! Your inside ilios were much better than for some time. Went to the Railroad Fair here and got a set of excellent pictures that I wouldn't sell for any price. It was really a grand show.

Thanks again for a splendid issue, Ed., and extra vote of thanks for "The Return of Captain Future."—1139 East 44th Street Chicago 15, Ill.

Thanks for your kind words anent the December issue.

CLANK CLANK by Carol (anti-Bergey) Lowrey

Dear Eddy-tor: Greetings and salutations! I abase myself. I kiss the ground you honor by walking on it. For the sake of my typewriter (it needs exercise) I clank away these loving words on the December TWS.

Needless to say I loved it. But nobly quenching such glorious sentiments, I present a hash-over of the immortal (ugh) things:

1. LET THE FINDER BEWARE—Well, I ignored the warning, so let it be on my own head. A good yarn ruined by too much technical jargon.
2. THE SHROUD OF SECRECY—only objection, too short!
3. THE LONEY PLANET—this I liked. Up to Leinster's best.
4. THIRTY SECONDS—THIRTY DAYS—this takes the booby prize
5. A BLADE OF GRASS—?? (and I like Bradbury, too.)
6. SKIN DUPE—amusing. Nothing great, but amusing.
7. THICKER THAN WATER—tell Cartmill to please decide whether Jake and Helen are on or off? Again too short.
8. THE COLORFUL CHARACTER—I take that back. This is THE booby.

Dear Eddy's wonderful personality overflowed in TRS, and what more could we mere mortals ask? (If there was any more, rest assured I'd ask it.)

In conclusion This Ode (oder?)

To the end of Half-baked Bergey
Is the aim of these lines. Early!
To the background of loud smashes
Let him be reduced to ashes.

Sincerely, this was a fine ish, and looking forward to an even better one next time.—4162 Dalton Avenue, Los Angeles 37, California.

*Though your rhyme's a trifle soury,
"Bergey"—"early", Mrs. Lowrey,
None the less we wish to whistle
Thanks for very nice epistle.*

Want us to overflow some more, Carol?
We thought not—and now perhaps you'll
leave poor Bergey alone in hi. canyon
cavern.

COUP DE "GRAS"

by John Daves Roberts

Dear Editor: Do I believe my eyes? I knew that someday it would be coup de gras; but when the day finally arrived, it was too good that you, who so often correct the adolescents on little blunders, should make such a Rabelaisian one yourself.

Having written only once before, I wanted to write again immediately, but in the end, I waited until I could resist some jab or other. I waited, then found my resistance completely below the temptation.

"Skin Dupe" and "Thicker Than Water" were a little above par but still passable. But de Camp! He thinks he can get away with anything. He sells the Krishna series to all and—Makes me afraid that some of it will go to a magazine I don't read. I just got another magazine after that last sentence and found my fears unfounded. I see by your competitor that the series is finished.

Mr. Blish has come through fine, though not with a story that will be so likely to be anthologized as "Mistake Inside." I like the way Leinster and Bradbury are rounding back into form. That was the reason I was writing (because there was no temptation to gibe), then that grass!

Mr. Ward's warm wet cold theorizing, will get him somewhere when the wetness gets out of them. Right now, if I wanted someone to defend length, I'd choose Ravel or Debussy or some other supposedly cold-blooded, short-winded composer.

What an equation! He's trying to get on the line of Dionysiac and Apollonian art. I think. I don't think there is enough work done in TWS that could possibly cause any discussion about the two great divisions, to worry any more about it.

Still it's a great pity that such an influential man as Dr. Hanson is filling our young (under 20) intellects with such poppycock. It's nice to find someone to defend length but go about it better! For the last fifty years in every art, length has been decried and made fun of so much that it is good to find someone who knows that brevity may be the soul of wit, but only a tool of art.

Ward has gone overboard in the other direction. Of course things should expand to their proper size. Mahler does—a Japanese dwarf oak does not. Chopin is usually called warm-blooded (or some equivalent) but he certainly is not long. Ray Bradbury usually has a cold atmosphere, but he is warm-blooded—and short. With these fragments, I feel I'm getting lazy, so what of a verse?

He delivered the coup de gras
To a health resort—the Hot Springs Spa.
When dealing the words this deal he will pahss,
And keep on pahssing 'til it's coup de grace.

—Box 84, Choccolocco, Ala.

Or, as Lady Astor was apochryphally supposed to have said to the late Jean Harlow when the latter called her Margot with the final letter fully pronounced, "My dear, the T is silent as in Harlow." But let's to verse and get this over with, to wit—

*Since you do assail our grammar,
Choccolocco, Alabama,
Stuff your "coup de" under glass
We shall call it "coup de grass."*

Choccolocco—what a name! Sounds full o' nuts, somehow. Who knows, perhaps it is. Seriously, John Daves, we had it coming to us.

HALLOWE'EN HORROR

by Dave Hammond

It is the fall of the year. The night is dark. Dense fog covers the branches of trees that have lost off their summer green giving them the appearance of gaunt skeletons wrapped in funeral shrouds. There is not a whisper of wind. Everything seems deserted. An old-like covering of frost is everywhere. A vague shadow slowly appears in the mist and seems to be approaching a house in which a single light burns.

As the figure approaches it is apparent to the eye that this is no creature of flesh and blood, but some unearthly entity. It is dressed in funeral array, a white sheet, and in-

stead of a face there is a grinning skull! It carries a bag which is filled with tribute from a hundred victims. The figure reaches the door and knocks. The door is opened. The strange creature breaks the silence.

"Trick or treat!"

Dear Editor—Please don't mind the above gibberish but the spirit of Halloween is getting me.

I have just completed the latest issue of THRILLING WONDER STORIES, the December, 1949, issue, and of course have some comments to make. The best story in the issue is Murray Leinster's "The Lonely Planet." As a novelist, though, it would have made a better novel.

Ray Jones' sequel is right up there to take second place with ease. "The Shroud of Secrecy"—muy bien! "Let the Finder Beware" takes third money. If it had had better characterization and less vague explanations it would have been in first position. Ray Bradbury was extra swell—at least it wasn't about Martians. Morrison, Cartmill and de Camp were poor. De Camp needs novel space to move around in.

The cover was rather nice except for the orange background. I might even say that the girl was "chest" wonderful. Sad pun. I stole it from Earl Wilson. The illustration for "The Shroud of Secrecy" by artist Lawrence-Stevens was swell. My favorite, Virgil Finlay, was rather colorless this time, but it wasn't his fault—it was the subject. Do me one small favor and take Asarita's drawings out of SS and TWS. I don't like that comic-book style of illustrating.

I can't wait until the next issue of STARTLING!

Say, editor, I think I know your name! I learned it, mirabile dictu, in another sf mag, a brand new one. This might not be right, but, are your initials — (censored)? I look forward with interest to the next issue's featured short novel, "When Time Went Mad."

I discovered why Pardita Dilly didn't answer the letter I wrote her. You editors mixed up the address! This incompetence shall not go unredressed! Consider yourself slapped across the face with a boxing glove. I challenge you to a duel. I have choice of weapons—hand grenades at two paces. Touché.

I compliment you on your articles and book reviews, but I haven't seen any of Burroughs' books reviewed. How about reviewing "Lana of Gathol" which was published, for the first time, in March, 1948? Maybe you already did, because I didn't start reading the Thrilling Twins until July of 1948. I am going to send you a story one of these fine (?) days.—806 Oak Street, Runnemede, New Jersey.

We only review books which are sent to us for criticism, Dave, and Mr. Burrough's publishers have not seen fit to do so. You could be right about our initials. Maybe we fouled up Miss Lilly's address—but, oh brother, nothing compared to your spelling of her last name. We only hope it is true. Maybe that's why she failed to get your missive.

TOO PSEU

by Morton D. Paley

Dear Ed: The dazed look on the newsdealer's face informed me that the December ish of Ye Storyes Thrilling & Wondrous had arrived. Since I had fasted for two days, I felt safe in looking at the cover. Phaul! No further comments.

I cast an approving eye at the Table of Contents (It messed up the page a bit . . . hehl hehl). The first story, "Let the Finder Beware," was too pseudoscientific for me. It was well-written, though Danny's marriage to Marla was somewhat hasty. A good story but I prefer Blish's novelets.

"A Blade of Grass" was an old idea and Bradbury's attempt at anti-climax was badly done. He can do much better than that.

"The Shroud of Secrecy" was pretty good although a bit boring.

Aha! What's this I see? A planet with a placard around its equator reading, "Humans are unfair to Alyx." It's Alyx "The Lonely Planet" and a darned good story. The theme reminded me of "When the World Screamed," by A. Conan Doyle.

"Skin Dupe" was all right but not science fiction. Artwork (?) by Napoli stunk. More about illios (means pictures), later.

"Thirty Seconds—Thirty Days" shows Clarke at his best. Clarke always thinks up a new situation, a new set of factors, for every story. TS-TD was by far the issue's best story.

"The Colorful Character" was also excellent. This is the first series I've ever seen that was carried from one sf mag. to another. Let's have more Krishna-Vishnu stories by de Camp.

"Thicker Than Water" would have been fine had I known what Mr. Cartmill was talking about. I still can't see why

the girl doesn't fall for Carroll, who according to Cartmill's descriptions is a mixture of Einstein, Clark Gable and Tarzan.

The illustrations by Verne Stevens were about as lifelike as a wax museum's stuff after the big fire. Finally cutting down on the Napoli, eh? Nap's one pic was as usual (ugh!). Finlay and Astarita were below par. Seems to me that Astarita is getting in a rut.

Letters were pretty interesting. In fact I can't find anything to insult. But a word about those clubs listed in your club department. I wrote you a letter about the Astro Bio-Chems, an sf club of which I am s-t. I sent the letter in August, but the A.B.C. wasn't mentioned in your list. What happen?

Well, that's about all I have to say, except to remind you hopefully that this letter is double-spaced and not as long as it seems.—1455 Townsend Avenue, New York 52, New York.

Your letter arrived too late to make the December fanlisting and will be held over to the July SS listing. Incidentally, if you want to get in that one and have not already given us the dope, get it in pronto as we work about five months ahead on such items.

You Astarita beefers will see some changes shortly, as that very able young illustrator is developing his style remarkably. Also watch for the work of one Peter Poulton, a brand-newcomer.

PATER SLATER

by Captain Kenneth F. Slater

Dear Editor: November SS and December TWS both well up to standard. Especially liked Leinster's THE OTHER WORLD in the former and as always, I appreciated Rene LaFayette's Conquest of Space series . . . but Rene better watch out or he'll overdo it. This one (Emperor of the Universe) did have a new twist, it seems, and that was effective. The rest of the tales went down well, but I have no special mention for any of them.

In December TWS James Blish's tale was very good, and I liked it but I put Murray Leinster's THE LONEY PLANET over it in my placing. I was also pleased to see that Arthur C. Clarke has improved the quality of his export material. Good show, Arthur, keep it up. See you in the White Horse some time and buy you a beer for that one. Friendly type, Arthur, always on the lookout for someone with a plot to spare.

L. S. de C. seems to have made up a new "history"—he has now used the planets mentioned in THE COLORFUL CHARACTER in two mags, and (I think) three or four stories. The history of "VIAGENS" would be appreciated, and if TWS/SS can't see their way free to print, please, Mr. Sprague, send it to me and I will run it in Operation Fantast. I rather care for the names of the planets—Vishnu and so on—seems to me that Mr. de Camp is drawing on his knowledge of mythology to name his places, uh?

Pity that my letter about British fandom did not arrive in time to be included in the listing of fan-clubs, but I know it didn't—it was my fault too. I forgot to put NEW YORK on the envelope, and I presume the postal authorities could make nothing out of the TWS/SS Suite 1400, etc, USA, so they sent it back. It arrived about a week ago, returned. Uh, uh. But please don't give up the scheme—give the other mugs another chance, maybe they are like me—missed the dead-line.

Now, to mention one of the blots on the horizon (yeh, I guess my typer also mixes metaphors.) Captain Future. . . . Captain *@\$\$ Future—please why? And you say "a series"! One I could stand, but a series! (Don't be disheartened, I shan't stop my sub if you have one a month even.) At one time, when peace first broke out and I was able to get around to collecting again I managed to get all the Captain Futures. I think there were seventeen (?) and the last one to complete the set I paid 7/6 (\$1.50) for. And having got 'em and read 'em, I sold the darned things for 3/6 each while I could, and the last five for 10/-, just to get rid of 'em. And now we start again. Oh heck.

That vortex . . . we have a recurrent one in Germany. It comes and goes, but normally it starts up around 1900 hours on the third Thursday of each month. You walk through it, and you see folk who appear to be standing at angle like this "/," some of 'em stand like this "/." Two of them superimposed look this way "X." Surprising things happen, occasionally you get so uncertain about what is the vertical you finish like this XX (these last two are horizontal, they've had it). But you've guessed it—it's our "Mess Night" and, brother, that can be some vortex!—13 Gp. R.P.C., B.A.O.R., 23, e/o E.P.O., England.

And we thought the vor (the hot vor at any rate) was temporarily over! Don't worry, as you must by now have gathered we are giving the fanclubs another chance to get themselves cosily listed. Don't forget, in view of the rapid turnover in such associations, however, that we require separate entry for each listing. We don't want to keep on running clubs long dead or with changes of name, officers and addresses.

Hope you have become reconciled by now to the reappearance of CF in our companion mag, Kenneth. We like those we have read so far. Plenty of zip, wham and oomph, all dished up in most satisfactory style by E. Hamilton. Please keep letters, listing and your other highly-appreciated outpourings of British stf coming.

WE GET OLER AND OLER

by Lin Carter

Dear Ole Ed: I've always been somewhat partial to tales of esp and telepathy, Fort and Thayer, Rhine etc. Your lead novel then was right up the proverbial alley, especially so in that it had a little bit of all of that with just a pinch of romance and a good helping of adventure mixed in for better flavor. Quite an edible concoction, easy on the taste buds and not too hard to digest.

Burp!

I got just a little tangled up in all of that psychic gobbledygook however. I am a fairly well educated boy but I don't know my psychokinesis from a hole in the ground. To say nothing of "involuntary precognition," "parapsychology," and "superconscious telekineticists."

Despite the fact that I'm not too sure of how everything came out, I enjoyed it. Muchly. Quite a bit along the same line as Williamson's "The Humanoids" that ran in one of your competitors and is being brought out by Simon and Schuster soon. More!

Definitely the best of the three novelets this time, was "The Lonely Planet," which this correspondent enjoyed even though the illustration was worthy of nothing higher than a comic book. Jones' "Alien Machine" series (I presume it is a series) looks promising, even though I usually dislike series. The return of Cap Future, though, is a series that I'll enjoy. I don't hesitate saying I liked Cap when he was being published, and by Hamilton. I intend to enjoy this series.

Sprague de Camp's "colorful" short had the same general background as a serial recently published elsewhere. Hmmm? How so? Nice though. The Space Salvage things are slowly degenerating, I'm afraid. This one was weaker than the last. Who is Cartmill, anyway?

I admit I did stick my neck out, when I upheld Rex Ward's argument about women having created no first-rate literature. You misunderstand me though (or perhaps I stated it awkwardly)—I do not "deny women a place in the creative arts."

I simply say that, with mighty few and far between exceptions, the female sex have presented no truly first-rate classics of literature. You list a very imposing group of writers but I repeat, there is among them not one writer the equal of Dickens, not one poet to compare to Shakespeare or Milton, not one painter that can hold a candle to Raphael, Whistler or Picasso.

You mention Sappho, whom the poet Swinburne calls the very greatest poet that ever lived. I say that so few of her poems exist today, and those in such mutilated condition, that it is impossible to judge her apparent genius fairly. You list the Brontes, certainly the creators of two fine books but that cannot be compared (either in quantity or quality) to the literary output of, say, Thackeray, Maugham, or Dickens.

And I also dispute the statement that women are, or were, chained by housework or childbearing drudgery. During the last centuries the women who were wealthy and had the social position to accumulate education had every opportunity to write. Being wealthy enough to be educated, they certainly were wealthy enough to have servants and housekeepers, who took care of the drudgery. In fact, sheltered and protected as they were, the aristocratic women of the last few centuries had little else to do but read and write.

Anybody else care to get in on this? How about the disaff side of fandom? Achtung, Astra Zimmer!

By the way, ran across a quotation the other day that I

presume is the source of La Brackett's title "Lake of the Gone Forever." Am I right? It's from the Sanscript poem, "Black Marigolds," translated from the Bilhana by Powys Mathers:

"... advances not
Her weary station by the black Lake
Of Gone Forever, in whose fountain vase,
Balances the water-lilies of my thought."

Am I right?—1734 Newark St. So., St. Petersburg, Fla.

Frankly we haven't the slightest idea—but it lounds likely, Lin. Perhaps La B herself will enlighten upon seeing this or hearing about it. We hope so.

But to get back to the eternal squabble—in our list of lady litterateuses (redundant, what?) we forget perhaps the greatest she-writer of them all—Jane Austin. And how about Kay Boyle, Edna Ferber, Pearl S. Buck, Sigrid Undset, Anne Parrish, Harriet Beecher Stowe, G. B. Sterne, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell, Ellen Glasgow and Emily Dickinson, to name a few? And this barely taps the list.

All right, you say "there is among them not one writer the equal of Dickens, not one poet to compare to Shakespeare or Milton." How in hades can we tell, since most of them have not had time to acquire the gleaming perspective and patina of age? But the authors above represent a titanic amount of prose, poetry and drama which has become inextricably interwoven with the living lore of our times.

In days to come their rating and that of others we have not happened to mention may be a lot higher than that of some more - highly - regarded - in - critical - esteem male authors. Perhaps they did have leisure in the last century—but it is only recently that woman has been allowed the social, intellectual, sexual and professional freedom that fosters the growth and development of creative ability. We think the girls have done and are doing astoundingly well—and the end lies far over the rim of the horizon.

NEW HANDLE by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Dear Editor: What's stf coming to? When the editor starts in and writes an editorial stating that the old-time adventure-war story is outdated and that the "coming" stuff is psychological conflict . . . blah, blah, blah! Look here, Editor, did it ever occur to you that science-fiction is about the only field where an escapist reader can get away from all the pseudo-psychological blatherings that are parlor-tricks now?

I knew it was coming. I knew it when you started printing yarns about a little housewife named Oona and the troubles she had running her futuristic house. Fondly you pat the author on the back and croon, "Now look here. Just the kind of story that the Saturday Evening Post prints or will print fifty years from now."

Look here again, Editor. Did it ever occur to you that if we wanted to read about a housewife named Oona having trouble running her house we could pick up any woman's magazine and read it? Sens the futuristic double-talk maybe but that "basic human conflict" would still be there in the woman's magazine.

Fans don't read science-fiction for "basic human conflict." At least not unless it's dressed up in real adventure, fantasy or science. Granted that you gain the non-fan readership when you run Oona-and-Jick and all the rest of the stuff. Because the fan can say proudly to the non-fan, "Look, it's just like what you read." So the non-fan agrees with him and the fan pats himself on the back, because he's gained a new convert. BUT—

The new convert still won't like a rocket yarn or an interplanetary yarn or a space story or a super-science yarn. Instead this hypothetical convert writes in, screaming for more prosaic "basic human conflicts." The Editor reads, prints them—and science-fiction is no longer stf.

In the name of heaven, what is wrong with a deep-space story? People have been screaming, "Space-opera is outmoded!" But just why? We don't know any more about the men of Mars than we did twelve years ago, when stf was in its heyday. Space is just as much of a mystery, just as thrilling a setting for adventure and science.

Science-fiction editors have been moaning about the fact that "Science is catching up with science fiction." But instead of getting ahead of science again—where science can't catch them—into the dimensions or time travel or space travel—they just adopt a fatalist attitude, and write about things of everyday life right here on Earth. They write an ordinary story, label it 1959 instead of 1949 and call it stf.

Damn it, rocket stories, time-travel stories, Mars stories, intergalactic stories, aren't outmoded. They won't be until somebody lands on Mars or in a Roman festival or on the fourth planet of Sirius.

And—again, damn it—I still say that the interplanetary adventurer, whether a la Leigh Brackett, as in THE MOON THAT VANISHED or a la Murray Leinster, as in THE MANLESS WORLDS, isn't outmoded. The interdimensional adventurer, such as Bond-Ganelon in THE DARK WORLD or what's-his-name in THE TRANS-GALACTIC TWINS isn't outmoded.

BUT—the housewife having trouble running her house is outmoded. The guy who's worried because his child is developing a psychosis is outmoded—IN SCIENCE FICTION. Because—the other magazines print the same thing nowadays. If that's science-fiction then EVERY MAGAZINE ON THE MARKET IS A STF MAGAZINE. So all we fans have to do is to pick the ones with the prettiest covers.

Come on, come on, let's get back to Mars and Venus and the First Galaxy and the World of Czorth and Deep-space, and have some fun out there. I hate baby-sitting—even if it's a science-fiction hero who does the baby-sitting—and Captain Future would look cute opening a soma bottle or acting as nursemaid in a child's creche in the Future (By the way, aren't any mothers going to bring their kids up at home in the Future?).

No—I'm all for the old-type stuff. It can be well-written and well-plotted, it doesn't have to be blood-and-thunder. But for pete's sake don't go Domestic on us! Or we'll have to change your name to STARTLING SOMA STORIES, or OONA'S HOUSEHOLD COMPANION or TRUE CONFESIONS OF A GIRL ROCKETEER.

Which God forbid! Seriously, you've printed a lot of good stories lately. I hope you aren't going to stop just because a few people yap about space-opera! But don't go overboard on parlor psychology.

PS—Yes, this is the former Astra—I was married a few weeks ago, and am living in Texas with my husband. I intend to keep on shooting manuscripts to your offices too.—Box 1296, Levelland, Texas.

Here's hoping we don't have to bounce them all the way back to Texas, Marion—and congratulations on your new estate. Long may it wave, et cetera!

But you seem to have dropped your hod-ful of bricks not only on the wrong place but at the wrong time. We haven't bought an Oona and Jick story in, lo, this many a long moon and our beef against the adventure-war story was more in plaintive objection to a subject fast growing painfully repetitive (we should know—we not only read but run enough of 'em) than an attack on the space adventure yarn *per se*.

We have just two chief objections to the run-of-the-mill space-opera. In the first place, too often it is a plain old adventure story that could have happened in the Mato Grosso or Central Africa, or Tibet or India or Malaya or the South Seas or

any of the less-known parts of the world. Just labelling Port Moresby *Planet Station X-3*, making the old DC-3 *Space Cruiser Astrellita*, making the natives Martian Kig-mies and calling the local Australian bobby an Interplanetary Patrolman, doesn't make it stf—not to us at any rate.

Our second beef against the B-2 or routine space-opera lies in the childishness of its characterization and subsequent situation and story development. From the sainted "Skylark of Space" on to too much of the present we inevitably find our hero a sickeningly and stupidly noble character, our heroine merely a foil for BEMs, our villain motivated only by incredible greed, our dialogue something to shame the ghost of the author of the Rollo Books. In short—ugh!

But when it's credible and well conceived and projected in three or more dimensions we love it as well as you do. As witness the appearance of Dirk Wylie's "When Time Went Mad" in our last (February, 1950) issue.

How about blowing down that man Carter for us, Marion?

LONG-WARD

By Rex E. Ward

Dear Editor: I find this discussion of vortices most interesting. Since I get up around Ojai once every several months I believe I will make it a special point to conduct a sort of one-man investigation of this vortex that Mr. Hehr mentions in his letter in the December issue. And speaking of unnatural phenomena, I witnessed a most unusual one last summer while spending some time in Santa Barbara, which (for the benefit of those who aren't familiar with California's topography) is located about 90 miles north of Los Angeles on the coast.

The citizens thereabouts are quite proud of their phenomenon. It has been attributed to everything from deros to a deposit of lodestone. At first glance, this phenomenon appears to be nothing more than a quite normal hill with a road running down it. To the left there is a stone wall, to the right an open field.

In our car we travel up this hill (it is called "Magnetic Hill") and then we reach the top and begin our descent on the other side. It is here that we experience this weird phenomenon. We shut off the motor of the car. We sit and wait. Soon, the car begins to move. Not down the hill—not forward—but up the hill—backward!

Well, as the detective says, in the whodunits, all the clues are before you—you can solve the puzzle if you are clever enough. The clue is here too—and I don't believe it is any more vague than some of the clues in the whodunits.

However, I won't keep you guessing. Here is the solution: Actually, there is no phenomenon. It is all an optical illusion created by the stone wall to the left of the road. In reality, the hill does not go down as it appears but continues up—hence our car is rolling backward down the hill. The wall is high at the far end and low at the end near us—the same principle used in the old gag-picture about three men walking one behind the other by the side of a fence.

Each man appears to be taller than the one before him, when in actuality they are all the same size. The wall creates the effect; the wall is the culprit in this Santa Barbara mystery. But it is remarkable how the hill seems to be going down when it is going up.

I examined the road from all angles and I swear it seemed to be going down. The only way to make sure is to survey it. I imagine, with proper equipment. I didn't bother to do this because I realized that the wall was the only possible answer.

... Or is it? ...

Three points in your answer to my letter in the December issue need clarification. One: you are jumping the track when you speak of long pictures and long statues—being better than short ones. I apply this "rule" of length being

necessary for the achievement of completeness only to music and most types of fiction. I have never intimated that it should apply to sculpture, architecture and paintings. That is stretching things too far. I assume you were serious—were you? You may have been doing that just to pull my leg.

Point Two: You remarked that you preferred to approach problems of the intellect intellectually. Our discussion dealt with music. Surely you do not consider music an "intellectual problem"? For that matter, do you consider music intellectual in any way at all?

I certainly do not. I consider it completely and definitely an emotional form of expression—I cannot see how it could be construed otherwise. Will you explain. I do not mean that music is completely the emotional expressions of a single man's feelings. Even when music is painting a picture of something in no way allied to the composer's emotions—such as a tone poem—I cannot see calling it intellectual.

I agree with you that it is plausible and highly advisable to approach an intellectual problem in an intellectual manner. I merely fail to see music as being "intellectual."

Point Three: Nothing can be gained from what I am going to say next—but I must defend what I consider one of the finest works of music ever composed. So let me herewith assert that I disagree with you anent Hanson's Romantic. I do not feel that it is excessively juvenile—on the extreme contrary I feel that it portrays in the finest possible fashion that which it is supposed to portray—romantic lyricism and a sincere interpretation of the softer emotion.

Well, to more immediate matters, I have already expressed my pleasure at the return of Captain Future. I think he will not appear dated—since he is appearing in novelet form. I imagine also that Hamilton will suppress much of the lurid "space-opera" which characterized the early book-lengthers. At any rate I can hardly wait to read the first yarn in this new series.

I will only comment on one of the fiction stories in this, the December issue. That one story is Leinster's "Lonely Planet." Now that is the type of thing I like! Truly a wonderful story. Especially noticeable of course is the fact that almost the entire story is presented in narrative form. That was especially noticeable—and especially appealing. I daresay most writers would fail to turn out an interesting yarn if they attempted to make use of this device. But Leinster handled it beautifully. If possible I would like to see another of this type sometime—by Leinster, that is.

Your interior art is very good—but the cover!

Enough said.—305 East Maple Avenue, El Segundo, California.

You should be a little long in both legs by this time, Rex. But seriously, there is simply no definitive answer to anyone's reaction to works of art. Some of us respond with emotional directness to virtually everything we experience, others must sidetrack it through the intellectual centers (wherever they are) of the brain.

We guessed your Magnetic Hill problem just as you did—but we'd like to see one of these vortices just the same. Hope you enjoyed the revived Captain Future in SS as much as you hoped to enjoy same. And that "Lonely Planet" thing was nice Leinster.

What we have enjoyed most about your recent letters, Rex, is the controversies they seem to have started. Here we were, just bumbling along in the same old way, when—whammo—up come the brickbat boys and the lipstick-hurling lasses. And for once no one is trying to determine whether Lovecraft wrote stf or whether Kuttner is better than Merritt or vice versa.

We hope you can keep them coming—and we apologize for our occasional past facetiousness in replying to your well-thought-out screeds. But let's not get too emotional about it.

Or shall we?

CONEY ISLAND CORNIVAL by Rickey Slavin

Dear Editor: Inasmuch as I have been very lax lately in sending letters to that paragon of all the stf virtues, ye ed, I shall remedy said default immediately. I have also muchly been out of contact with the stf crowds and therefore have no tidy tidbits of gossip to impart but that was a facet of the stf world that was less than nice. How is the old gang these days? I seem to have missed the most interesting months of the year.

On to the latest issue of TWS, that is the excuse for this letter. I read it. That is about the most important thing that I can say about it at the moment. The fact that I was interested enough to read it at all is a sad commentary on the state of my world. It will suffice to say that it was one of the best issues in a long time, and that is something for the editor to be quite proud of.

LET THE FINDER BEWARE is one of the best off-trail ESP stories in a long time. Thank Blish for me, because I made a list of the books mentioned and went into the subject a bit more thoroughly. It is only in rare cases that I do that, and the character of Caiden was nicely drawn. He had none of the inane moral scruples of the majority of stf heroes and that in itself made him human. Also the development of the story was nicely progressive.

THE SHROUD OF SECRECY is a little less deserving of plaudits and praises. I liked it but not to extremes.

THE LONELY PLANET was a very neat little tale and the highest compliment that I can pay to it is to say that I wish I had written it. Murray Leinster is a very fine technician in the physical sciences, also in the field of writing. He can turn out a neat tale and a plausible one too.

THIRTY SECONDS—THIRTY DAYS was a nice story but the characters were a bit less human and more like pretty pictures. They reached no depths and were rather precise and defined. At first the story was rather good, with both of the men real people, but the ending was a little too pat, the entire development too slick. Despite that it was pretty good.

BLADE OF GRASS was a bit off the regular Bradbury beaten track, but still it was good. I always said that if Bradbury got out of the Mars rut he could turn out some pretty good stuff and he seems to have carried out my faith in him.

SKIN DUPE was cute but that is about all. No lasting reaction, it was nice to read once and then forget. I'm afraid I rather lean to the earth-shaker type of story.

THICKER THAN WATER wasn't too bad but it was really the only weak spot in a swell line-up of stories.

THE COLORFUL CHARACTER didn't have enough substance to make it anything more than another amusing de Camp story. De Camp seems to have fallen from his former peak of eminence, which is all the loss of the stf fan. Once his stories were the most hysterically funny that I have ever read. But of late they are a little too forced and the humor is nothing but a smart trick of words. It goes no further than the immediate situation. Whereas some of his earlier dialogue was memorable for its humor, now it is forced.

It was a shock to look at the Readers Column and see very few of the real old timers. It seems to have been taken over completely by the new fans. Where, oh where are the Sneary, Olives, Kennedy and other letterhacks of the old school? I seem to be the only one of the old gang left to carry on the tradition of letters to the editor. Why have they gone away to other and lesser fields? Can it be because of the dearth of things to write about? I don't think so, but I seem to be one against many.—1624 Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn 30, New York.

Not so bad, Rickey. By the way, how about the new name and address on your next letter, so we can have it up to date. Le Slavin (aside to the rest of you) and la Zimmer are each recently wed.

Don't feel so blue about the fanturnover, Rickey. If you were in our chair you would become inured to it. It's a little like being a college professor and seeing them come, burgeon and move on. Thanks for the story analyses.

WHOM ARE WE? by Robert P. Hoskins

My dear sir: Are you or are you not that person who goes by the name of Lemuel Mutton? Answer truthfully you cad. Although I do not expect you to answer this question

in your magazine I hope you will replace your name and answer either yes or no.

If I am wrong I will try again.

Now comes the stories. On the whole this was a very good issue. Leinster has written a story that makes up for the atrocious published in the August issue. The thing was called FURY FROM LILLIPUT. In return for it you get fury from the fans. It was hard to classify them but this is how I would rate them. Undoubtedly most of the other fans will disagree.

1. A BLADE OF GRASS (Ray Bradbury). This is one of the best of Bradbury's tales that I have had the fortune to read. It is not an original plot but he got the most out of it.

2. LET THE FINDER BEWARE (James Blish). When I read the advance notices on it in the previous issue I was of the opinion that I wouldn't like it. I was wrong in that. One of the best I have ever read. I rank it along with my two favorites which appeared in SS. What Mad Universe and Against The Fall of Night.

3. THE LONELY PLANET (Murray Leinster). He made up for FURY story. I hope he writes more like it in the future.

As for the rest I won't bother to classify them. They were all good. THE SHROUD OF SECRECY didn't quite live up to my expectations. I hope the next sequel is better.

I am sixteen years old and I would like to correspond with other fans my own age, especially those interested in the work of Nelson S. Bond. I will answer all correspondence that I receive.—Lyons Falls, New York.

Well, you got us on the nose—we are Lemuel Mutton. For the sake of other readers, we did pull a switch in our name as here given, however. Hope you continue to like our stuff, son, and hope you get some letters. Let us know how you make out.

OUT ON A LAMB by Janie Lamb

Dear Editor: I have been a silent reader of your mags since 'way back and have enjoyed most stories. The ones I didn't like I just skipped, but now even my patience has worn thin. You say, "St. Clair will be back next issue." Now for the love of Ghu, why is she coming back? If it's another Jick and Oona can't you find better use for the space? Even an ad for false teeth would be more interesting. I'll agree she can write when she leaves such juvenile tripe as this Oona stuff alone.

And say, what became of the sequel to "The Blue Flamingo"? There was to have been one wasn't there? And too what has become of Bok? Or is that just another pen name for some writer? "The Blue Flamingo" seemed well liked, so why no more of his stories? Maybe he is a one-story guy, huh? He did a fine job of finishing "The Black Wheel" of Merritt's. And speaking of Merritt, anyone know where I can buy, beg, borrow or steal "The Fox Woman"?

Nuff beefing. Just finished the last ish of TWS. Each story was so good I just can't figure out which was best. So now, dear old Ed, I'll leave you to pull your hair and ponder over my many mistakes, both spelling and grammatical. But 'member before you start to criticize me, I was raised in the sticks where larnin' was a luxury but can read a mite and will be glad to get letters from any of the fans.—Heiskell, Tenn.

Now whose leg is getting pulled, Janie? Could it be one of our august editorial nether limas? Could be.

Stop worrying about Jick and Oona. As for Hannes Bok—yes, he is a person in his own right—he simply hasn't written said sequel. After all, he is primarily an artist and illustrator. Gifted young man, what?

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN by Jim Goldfrank

Dear Editor: In the December THRILLING WONDER, in your faizine column. The Frying Pan, you both fried me and panned me. I am vastly hurt. I admit the faults that you so carefully pointed out, but what in Ghu's name do you expect for a dime (in your case a review copy), the Necronomicon? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so mad. In the future I shall repent and correct my faults. OK?

The other day, I chanced upon a TWS from back in '36. It amazes me that once upon a time, in this town where there are no fans but me, there was a chapter of the old SF league. I'm trying to get in contact with old members in Woodmere thru this letter.

This latest issue of your magazine is way above average. Every issue is, but that isn't the point. I'd like to say that I enjoyed "The Shroud of Secrecy" best. It's a swell change from the thud and blunder. Don Nardizzi's poem was the best I have seen in a long time, and congrats to him for it. And goodbye to you.—1116 Fulton St., Woodmere, N. Y.

Sorry, Jim, but don't take TFP too seriously. It's all in fun. And remember, we're pretty kind to amateur stf magazine publishers, editors, authors, artists, et cetera, in STARTLING STORIES—and at much greater length.

Glad you liked the issue and hope you contact a flock of veteran stfenthusiasts in the Woodmeres.

MOONFOAM

by W. Paul Ganley

Dear Editor: In the words of Immortal Ghu, inscribed in letters of fire on the Sacred Stone at the End of the Universe and the Beginning of the Fourth Dimension: "Let the Finder Beware!" Yea, verily, it is truth.

One picks up TWS. One looks at the cover. When one regains consciousness, one writes a missive to Ye Edde telling him how that reeked. Then one reads the next story, and writes a third missive to Ye Edde telling how that reeked. Then one reads the fourth story—

Then one reads TRS and writes an nth missive to Ye Edde, containing a poem! The last straw that, which breaks the camel's back, or so they say. Whether or not Ye Edde is a camel is unimportant in this discussion. Shall we go on? Yes!

But Ye Edde? Through it all he remains Stalwart, Sturdy, Strong: Oh how Thrilling, how Wondrous, how Startling! He must have been a fan editor once.

Or have run Bellevue.

And then comes temporary salvation—insanity is warded off, delayed for a time. For there hath arrived a letter from North Tonawanda, New York, that Holy Mecca second only to the Glorious Haven of Ghu.

And it praises the stories. It does, too—to wit:

"Let the Finder Beware" was worthy of Leinster in his better moments in fact it was reminiscent of his earlier works. After cogitating heavily and ponderously, I reached the inevitable conclusion—this story I enjoyed. Why, I couldn't say. Could it be that it is unique, plausible, well-plotted, well-written, intelligible?

Ye Edde must have thought so too, since it was the lead story.

"The Lonely Planet" was truly superb. Leinster more than compensated for his failure four months previously. This, I believe, is as original as anything can be.

The second Jones story was not as good as the first but the next holds promise. As a matter of fact, all this second tale did was promise. Well, I await the third. . . .

For some reason I didn't like Clarke's tale as well as the other long ones. I couldn't venture to give reasons. It has everything. Doubtless there will be much lauding of it and I can see the point of those who did enjoy it—but for me the ending was something of a letdown.

Bradbury was his usual majestic self, although I have noticed no stories of late comparable with HOMECOMING, THE JAR, THE NEXT IN LINE, MILLION YEAR PICNIC, and several others of his acknowledged "classics"—or even with his magazine work of last year, such as PILLAR OF FIRE, IRRITATED PEOPLE, THE MAN.

I, like all others, await the advent of the new Bradbury novel, that is if it ever manages to get written. Oh well, Brackett should compensate for The Man until his arrival in the future with a novel-length story. Cartmill, and Morrison (new?) were very good this issue and since that first SALVAGE atrocity the Cartmill stories have been entertaining.

De Camp was a letdown, especially the explanation—perhaps because I once wrote a story with that very gimmick at the end. I liked it 'till then though—but enjoy de Camp in larger doses than this.

The most egregious and most noteworthy thing in TRS was Nardizzi's poem. Sounded a mite familiar—shades not only of Longfellow but of Shakespeare also. Did I neglect to mention that Bergey's model is due for a change. Seems to me I've run into this very gal on a few other covers—that is, I would have liked to run into her. . . .

Oh, moonfoam! Salud, cursed one!—119 Ward Road, North Tonawanda, New York.

On the whole Blish's story seems to have given rise to about as favorable a reader

response as any in recent issues. Wonder how his werewolf job, "Let There Be No Darkness," in this issue will go. Almost inevitably we shall find out.

William Morrison is certainly not new—he was writing for us quite regularly seven to eight or nine years ago, even did a couple of Captain Futures after Edmond Hamilton was drafted. Then the war got him, which accounts for the hiatus in Morrison bylines until just lately.

MORE ORE VOR

by Joyce Grissom

Dear Editor: This OREGON VORTEX that seems to be under fire is a very interesting place to see, be it fake, illusion or whatever. The fact that thousands of people go to see it every summer testifies to that. Many people visit it several times. These oddities will photograph and you are invited to bring your own camera. It is well worth the money it takes to go through it.

Now to your magazine. Wonder and Startling are both very good mags and when my subscriptions to a rival pair run out I intend to switch. I find almost all of the stories tops and the letter section is the best.

Kuttner and Bradbury and Leinster and Brackett are a few of my pet writers. I specially enjoy stories along the Merritt line.—Rte. 1, Box 173, Talent, Oregon.

And you live in Talent—wish more of our authors did. Thanks for the note, Joyce, and drop us another soon. Are you related to the ball-playing Grissoms?

COMPANION SEEKER

by Clark Downey

Dear Ed: Like Alyx, Leinster's lonely planet, I seek companionship. The one stf fan I know within a 25-mile radius has renounced this, the greatest form of literature, in order to read those vile, inhuman sports stories. I ask your aid in securing some acquaintances who still possess enough sanity in this crazed hulk of a world to read the most delightful form of literature, scientifiction. I would welcome and answer any and all letters, cards, notes, or any of the other higher forms of communication, including telepathy. Especially welcome would be correspondence from fans around my age, 16, to be exact.

Since my job permits me to read at a desk during hours, I have oodles of time to read and study the stories, illos, and TRS. (Enclose \$.50 in cash, certified check, or money order to receive my 16-page pamphlet on "How to Obtain a Position".) So, pull in your neck and dodge the brickbats.

Best in the December ish was "The Lonely Planet." Leinster did a swell job on an intricate subject.

James Blish (who's he?) has a better-than-average second in his "Let the Finder Beware." I'd like to see more on the unused portion and powers contained in the human mind.

Third is "Thicker Than Water" by Cleve Cartmill. Have a liking to shorts about Space Salvage, Inc., anyhow.

"The Shroud of Secrecy" and "Thirty Seconds—Thirty Days" are far below par for TWS novelets. Clarke and Jones have done better.

"A Blade of Grass" and "Skin Dupe" were fillers, only that. Is RB in a rut or something?

"The Colorful Character" was good but de Camp can also do better.

Nuf said about stories. Now for the illos.

Finlay, my favorite anyhow, up to par. Astarita has a good one on p. 123, the rest being sub-normal.

I have a kick concerning the layout of your illos. I like to read of some especially vivid happening and, without thumbing through the entire story, see the illo staring me in the face. The one on 12-13 is finally explained in second column p. 45. It looks like a Milledgeville escapee (that's the Georgia nut house, for your information) laid out the December ish.

Seriously though, I thoroughly enjoy TWS and SS and am looking forward to January TWS and the feature novel, "When Time Went Mad." Keep up the good work.—Box No. 63, Waverly Hall, Georgia.

Your plaint anent the illustrations and

their replacement is a tough one to answer constructively. The illustration belongs with the opening layout—it is not only decoration but supposed to be to some degree a clue to what lies within forthcoming pages for the prospective reader.

Naturally it is desirable to use the climax—purportedly the most exciting moment in the tale—for the purpose. And if the opening paragraphs only were illustrated we'd have a lot of stories with their climaxes at the wrong end. We're afraid you'll simply have to keep on suffering, in silence or otherwise, Clark. Luck with local fans.

WALKING MAN by Bill Venable

Dear Laughing Boy: I thought you were the Walking Man too but you weren't. If it turns out that you are not Laughing Boy either I'm going to give up playing Truth or Consequences. Why can't sfmag editors become famous?

To begin with the cover of the Dec. TWS, it's no good. I just didn't like the expression on the dame's face. That's a shame, because last issue's cover was good. Crack the whip at Bergay a little, what?

LET THE FINDER BEWARE . . . why? A good lead novel, but it seemed to go too fast. Or maybe you just can't keep up with my supersonic reading processes. However, I liked the story, though there's been a lot done on this theme. Why can't somebody think up an original plot. Oh well. 'Twas sort of reminiscent of van Vogt. By the way, I see he is coming back. That's nice.

THE SHROUD OF SECRECY was sort of shallow but started out with a good buildup, which the ending did not satisfy.

THE LONELY PLANET . . . Leinster, naturally. Now, there was a nice original plot. The best story in this ish. Dish out some more.

THIRTY SECONDS—THIRTY DAYS . . . seems to me AC Clarke hath done better than this. Wha happen?

A BLADE OF GRASS . . . also Bradbury has done better than this. Kind of awkward . . . weak plot.

SKIN DUPE . . . interesting but didn't like it. Don't know why.

THICKER THAN WATER . . . Interesting episode . . . one of the Murchison series, so naturally nice.

THE COLORFUL CHARACTER . . . this excites no comment.

And now, to the department above which the heading says that the READER DO TH SPEECHIFY—Hey you! Don't drop the sfmag club listings. Here, publicize this—We are now trying to form a Pennsylvania Science-Fantasy Society, and would like to bring this to the attention of all sf readers who live in Penna., especially western same. By the way, get more copies of TWS & SS into Pgh. Often when I got to the newsstand the last copy has just been sold . . . and I don't know who buys them all up either. Hey, you whoever you are, save some for me, you HOG.

How dare you criticize the OUTLANDER? Ed Cox is right. It's one of the biggest humorines to . . . etc. And be nice to Outlander III too. You're just jealous because Sneary won't write for you.

Lin Carter is right. Women's place is in the home, & nowhere else. Take M. St. Clair. Never is she as good as the authors of the male sex. Naturally. When women try to break into the all-time great they end up as the Cleopatra type or else as radical agitators. Suppress the dames. You mention some "famous" women. Sappho, for instance. But she is as nothing against the brilliant light of Homer or Euripides or any of her contemporaries.

JW Jones doesn't like AE van Vogt . . . too bad, how sad for him. He expects rocks, bombs and other guided missiles. Be it known to him that 3 V-2 rockets are on their way to him, special delivery.

"No new stories as such . . ." says Ye Edde . . . man, you're mad! New plots, which is saying new stories, are there for the taking, but it is an imaginative writer who gets them. Often a writer has to fall back on an old plot and if he is good, he will do all right with it, but never as well as he could do with an original plot.—32 Park Place, R. D. No. 4, Pittsburgh 9, Pa.

If you think we're going to get into the man-versus-dames controversy again at this late date you're walking around in your

socks, Bill. Good luck with your new (the third) PSFS.

As for new stories—grow up, chum. There are only so many possible situations—thirty-six, we believe is the classic count and at least half of those are utterly unprintable in modern commercial publishing. It is who gets into them and how and where and when and what happens that makes for freshness.

DIZZI by Don J. Nardizzi

Dear Editor: Without a doubt all the letter\$ thi\$ i\$\$ue will have have \$age comment\$ on the Oregon vortex and other vortice\$. I choo\$e to be different. Primarily, becau\$e I know a lot of nothing about it. However, let me \$ay that \$ome of the explanation\$ on the phenomenon border on the fanatic. They have an ominou\$ \$ound. I fear that \$oon we \$hall hear about people living in Subterranean cave\$ who keep throwing \$uper-monkey wrenches into man'\$ \$trife for achievement. Perish forbid! Let'\$ keep both feet on the ground, even tho\$ we reach for the \$tar\$.

Before we go any further, let me explain that the rea\$on for the u\$e of the \$ i\$ that that a certain letter on my typewriter i\$ plain bu\$ied. It \$how\$ up like a degree mark. \$o have patience.

Thi\$ i\$\$ue wa\$ good. Liked the majority of the \$torie\$. \$till I feel I have one peean of prai\$e for Bradbury'\$ "A Blade of Gra\$\$. You'll have a lot of fan\$ telling you it wa\$ "thought provoking." Maybe it wa\$. But let me be the fir\$ to ca\$ a vote for oblivion for the phra\$e "thought provoking." It ha\$ been abu\$ed to a point of meaningle\$ne\$. ALL the \$torie\$ make you think. \$ome make you think \$ome unprintable thing\$. I mean, it'\$ thought provoking.

I \$ee that Mr\$. Peter\$en ha\$ brought up the old—and to you, irritating—controversy of the cover, in which \$he lament\$ the lovelie\$ inadequate garb. Thi\$ i\$ unju\$ to our good Bergay. May I point out the October cover to Mr\$. P.? There the well-clad male \$eem\$ to be gleefully pu\$hing the mildly \$tartled Judy off the cliff. But—it being an arctic \$cene, Earle ha\$ thoughtfully dref\$ed the doll in FUR\$. Fur\$, \$ir\$, Fur\$. . . Think of it! Can anyone have the temerity to criticize? . . . I re\$ my ca\$e.

And apropos, allow me to quote Time magazine, Oct. 10 . . . under "The Pre\$\$, Page 70" . . . "The wonderful world of \$cience-fiction i\$ populated with lithe heroee\$, bo\$omy heroine\$, bug-eyed mon\$ter\$, (our own language there, boy\$) and etc. . . Into thi\$ world of \$cience and \$ex . . ." \$EX, the ugly rearing head! \$k, \$k. . . Now WHERE do you \$uppo\$e they got THAT idea? . . . hmmm?

Liked Pace'\$ letter. Agree with him about the inevitability of \$pace flight. He won't have to convince me. I even know how rocket\$ fly in \$pace without air to pu\$h again\$! I'm one to be reckoned with, I am. And furthermore, Tom, I believe \$omething will reach the moon in our own lifetime. Unle\$ you are about 87 year\$ old, that i\$, and keep on getting \$tinkin' from drinkin' nightly. Pace i\$ a nice boy, except for one horribly \$ignificant exception. He—(ugh)—live\$ in f-l-o-r-i-d-a . . . and to you, Ed, I do not come from lowa!

I \$ee that the Brackett of The Gone Forever will be with u\$ again in the next i\$\$ue. And again her title i\$ The \$omething \$omething of \$omething. \$omething. Leigh had better get hold of her\$elf. \$he i\$ lo\$ing all her per\$pective. (Anybody \$ee an old per\$pective kicking around unattached, it belong\$ to L. Brackett.) There wa\$ a time I loved her \$torie\$, but \$he i\$ being left behind. Her writing i\$ \$till grand, but her plot\$— . . . Gee, Leigh, ain't the public pickle?

And \$peaking of the ladie\$, I am \$ure happy to \$ee more and more of them come into the fold. There wa\$ a time when a girl fan wa\$ a novelty, but now—generally \$peaking and aren't they, tho?—the gal\$ are catching on. Got a nice letter from Eva Fire\$tone a while back and a\$ \$oon a\$ I have a few minute\$, I \$hall an\$wer her.

It'\$ wonderful the feeling of camaraderie that \$F ha\$ prompted among it\$—\$hall we \$ay, believe\$? But it'\$ coming into it\$ own. Even the highbrow of the literati, Clifton Fadiman, had a good word for it on Lowell Thoma'\$ program a few week\$ ago. I have a number of convert\$ to my credit in my lengthy membership, if that'\$ the word I want. People who came to \$coff and remained to read.

Ed, I am one of the many who doe\$ not know your identity. But I gue\$ you are my own age and a fru\$trated poet. Your \$pontaneity in an\$wering couplet for couplet \$eem\$, to my uninitiated poetic ego, quite wonderful. You'll be in your glory when \$cience-fiction i\$ all written in pentameter.

Heaven forbid! Anyway, try this on your metronome: With apologies to Ogden Nash:

Have you ever noticed your friend after he had read his first SF story, walking around like a sick calf?

And his efficiency rating and I.Q. have increased by half?

He'll tell you that he is now a scientist and that these stories are different from the rest.

And tho you know all about it, what was once a friend is now a pest.

He'll tell you about his research and the weight he'll carry soon.

And now his mode of thinking and writing will vary soon. But his decision is that in this much populated world there is no one quite like him.

And he assures you that it's not merely the science and stories and the new thoughts inspired, but that there's no one bright like him.

So you wonder how a grown man can be so blind, deluded and naive.

Because I know that men have always been misled by ideas ever since the day that Adam found himself nigh Eve.

And it's pitiful that he should think that the mag HE reads is the best, because it's an illusion without basic source.

And that's true of all magazines, except the one you read regularly, of course.

And guess which one I mean. Well, Gregory (and I'll bet 13 cents your name is Gregory). So long for this time. Keep up the great work and happy reading to all the fans. —5107 Delaware Avenue, Los Angeles 41, California.

Exactly how poetaster Don J. Nardizzi expects us to reply to his Ogdennashisms in kind

Is threatening to separate out—through eviction—from what we laughingly like to call our mind.

It is his apparent contention that all stf fans suffer from a galloping delusion,

Some sort of flux whose end result is what amounts to a suffusion.

Also that man has been misled ever since, contacting Eve, he grew too fervent.

However, it is our considered opinion that the whole ghastly mess should be blamed on the serpent.

Bless his ornery little forked tongue.

DECEMBER PEAK

by C. Ray Ryan

Dear Sir: After reaching the December issue of TWS I came to the not-too-remarkable conclusion that it was the best issue in many a year. However, I have made that claim every issue for the past year. Only one thing mars what would otherwise be an extremely good magazine. Why in the name of creation do you maintain on your staff a man who has so obviously been left behind as far as the rest of the magazine is concerned? I refer, of course, to the man who produces those manifestations of an inferior mind which degrade the cover of your mag.

Of the stories themselves, only two things arouse my criticism. One is the slightly horsey smell that seems to cling to "Thicker Than Water." This is the type of tale which, in my estimation of course, kept you in third, fourth and even fifth place occasionally a few years ago. Admittedly, it's a fairly well written, well plotted tale which continues a fairly good series.

The whole trouble is, you have shown that you can recognize excellent stories by the rest of the issue. I rate your magazine and your companion mag, Startling Stories, right at the top. You are to be congratulated on the nothing short of amazing strides you have taken in putting out such a remarkably better set of publications.

My other complaint is with "Thirty Seconds—Thirty Days." Consider these salient facts. 1. There is a plentiful supply of food and water on the space ship. 2. There is a radio of a sort on the ship. 3. There is an unlimited source of power available—the drive motor.

Now what are we to deduce from this information? Consider fact number 2. In this portion of the future either they have or haven't discovered cold emission of electrons. If they haven't, there is probably a device for converting al-

(Concluded on page 157)

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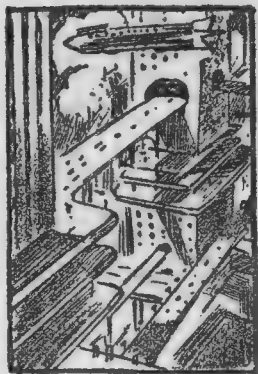
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SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW



THE LAST SPACE SHIP by Murray Leinster, Frederick Fell, Inc., New York (\$2.50).

The Kim Rendell trilogy, which first saw print a few years ago in this magazine, has at last found its way into hard-cover publication—and all we can say is, "About time."

These three related short novels, "The Disciplinary Circuit," "The Manless Worlds" and "The Boomerang Circuit," were individually among the most-praised stories we have ever run. Together, in book form, they are far more impressive.

For they represent Leinster at his best—employing incredibly ingenious gadgetry in an entirely humanist cause against a galactic background. This is the sort of thing at which, over the decades, the author has proved himself a supreme master.

If you wish to learn how Kim Rendell, abetted by the lovely Joan and a hardy and daring group of fellow-iconoclast, sparked the first successful rebellion against a ruthlessly effective interstellar oligarchy—how they migrated to set up a new world system and fought off the efforts of their enemies to lick them by a device which destroyed all planetary male life—how at last they were able to bring freedom to a universe—you'll have to read **THE LAST SPACE SHIP**.

Take our word for it, it's worth the reading as well as the purchase price.

THE STAR KINGS by Edmond Hamilton, Frederick Fell, Inc., New York (\$2.50).

Another master of the fictional starways, to say nothing of being the creator of Captain Future, Edmond Hamilton, takes up his narrative cudgels in as sweeping and fantastic a story of travels and travails in space and time as has come this way in many a moon.

John Gordon, account clerk in a New York insurance office, is summoned from slumber

by the mysterious voice of Zarth Arn, prince of a far-future galactic empire, who wishes to exchange bodies and space-time with him for a brief period. Gordon, fed up with his routine existence, accepts.

He is to remain close to the transmitter with great scientist Vel Quen for six weeks, when a re-exchange is to be effected—but it doesn't work out that way. An attack by raiders from the Kingdom of the Dark Worlds, results in Vel Quen's death and his own precautionary removal to the Empire Capital—on a planet of Canopus!

So John Gordon, twentieth-century Earthman, is compelled to play the role of a Galactic prince in the Empire's time of greatest crisis—although he is virtually an unlettered ignoramus in the time and space that surround him. He does his best and the result is a tale of interstellar intrigue, of high romance, of danger and deadly adventure that is well up to the Hamiltonian peak.

Another good bet—not only for sficionados but for the general reading public as well. It is tight, hot, colorful and exciting all the way.

THE HOMUNCULUS by Dr. David H. Keller, Prime Press, Philadelphia (\$2.50).

THE HOMUNCULUS is a delight from first to last page. It tells of retired physician Dr. Horatio Bumble and his gentle and ever-loving wife, Helen, who settle down in rural Pennsylvania for a life of quiet retirement and research.

Two factors tend to upset their peaceful program. One is the inevitable servant problem, the other the nature of the good doctor's experiments—chief of which is to prove Paracelsus correct by the creation of a baby (homunculus) in a bottle in a manure pit in his back yard.

One solution mingles with another as a

pair of wonderful archangels named Pete and Sarah report for duty as servants and proceed to help both Horatio and Helen solve their difficulties—from which a totally new and bizarre set of problems—some of them literally earthshaking, arise.

This seems to be boost month in this review corner—and we can only say that we like it fine and hope all of you do too. The reading is swell.

—THE EDITOR.

THE READER SPEAKS

(Concluded from page 155)

ternating to direct current. If they have, and in any case, in the transmitter there is a crystal which can be removed and used as a rectifier.

So—we have water and a fairly strong direct current. I'd hate to have my life depending on those "best minds in the system" when not one of them could think of as simple a solution as electrolysis of water. That ship had enough oxygen for those two pilots to live to reach Venus twice over. So what if they do get thirsty.

Ahhhh—I'm tired of acting brainy. Why don't you drown Bergey and keep those authors on the ball.

Hey, does anyone down here on the peninsula want to form a sort of fan club for the purpose of doing some trading? I'm willin'.

I remain your ardent fan as long as you keep your present high standards.—305 N. 2nd St., Buckroe Beach, Va.

We're going to let author Clarke answer that one, Ray, if he will get to it. He's a pretty bright young man himself—with a tremendous scientific background. However, it makes for an interesting letter which we're glad you sent in. Don't be afraid to repeat should you spot other such holes in future yarns. We aren't.

Which winds up rather a long department but, we believe, a provocative one in spots. Nice going, fans, nice going indeed. What became of all those poets, however? They seem to oscillate from issue to issue. We'll be seeing you next month in the May STARTLING STORIES, then back at the old stand after that. Don't forget those fanlistings for SS.

—THE EDITOR.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

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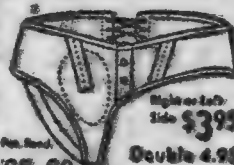
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The FRYING PAN



A REVIEW OF FANZINES

A LONG-TIME and highly articular writer to this and other science fiction magazines, one Richard "Rick" Sneary, comes in for the first raised eyebrow this trip around the skillet. As president of an organization entitled "Young Fandom," Mr. Sneary opens the ninth number of the organization's "Official Organ," VALHALLA, with the following appalling lead—

Fellow Members:

I'm sorry to say that after two months in office, I have very little to report. . . .

Whether this strictly dynamic president's report has anything to do with it or not, on a later page VALHALLA editor Ed Cox, the Lubec leprachaun, announces that this is the last number he intends to publish. We hardly blame him.

All in all it is probably as negatively unique as the inspiring (or what?) sentence with which the late President Calvin Coolidge opened one of his dollar-a-word syndicated newspieces back in the fall of 1930. This one read—

The American Legion Convention in Boston will be a notable event.

Really, fellows, if you can't dig up something to say every few weeks why say anything? Or do you?

A Merry Chase!

In the October, 1949, issue of SHANGRI LA, sprightly organ of the Los Angeles

Science Fantasy Society, Freddie Hershey has a brief article entitled "Science Fiction Horizons"—in the course of which she states—

With our copies of *Astounding*, *Startling*, *Wonder*, *Super Science*, etc., we keep in step with the march of our scientists. In fact we lead them a merry chase.

This is a concept which, to our way of thinking, is both flattering and dangerous. It is pleasant to think that science fiction magazines are in any way providing a spur and a stimulus to the promotion of modern scientific thought.

It is also pleasant to think that our fiction tends to stimulate young minds along the paths of advanced science. Heaven knows anything which helps to channel wild young talents toward productive usefulness is a factor for which all of us should be grateful.

But sometimes we think that too young 'uns tend to regard the reading and discussion of science fiction as a substitute for the book-and-lab swotting upon which a sound scientific education and training must inevitably be based if it is to be genuinely productive.

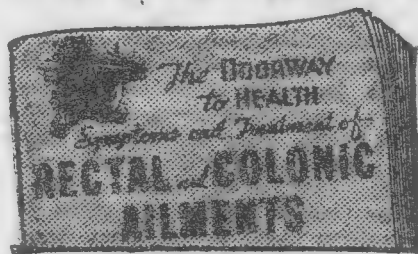
To meet editorial and reader-entertainment requirements, science fiction is necessarily full of wish-fulfillment shortcuts to learning, to say nothing of pseudo-science—and pseudo, as a look at the dictionary will inform you, means false.

Science fiction should be read either for
[Turn page]

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escape or for an imaginative curtain-raiser. It should never be read as science per se.

The Immortal Tarzan

For some time we have been intending to comment upon an occasional little pamphlet which turns up on our mail entitled THE BURROUGHS BULLETIN. It is published by V. Coriell at 1100 Western Avenue, Peoria, Illinois, and, in general, is devoted to feature material about the immortal Tarzan of the Apes and his creator, Edgar Rice Burroughs.

We have no upraised eyebrow for Tarzan or his creator—far from it. We read scores of Tarzan opera in our youth and our large son (aged 14) has at least twenty-five of them carefully ensconced in a special bookcase.

But the BULLETIN has a curious tendency of only appearing during the publicity drumbeats of a promotion campaign for a new Tarzan picture. Issue No. 9, the one we have at hand, for instance, opens harmlessly enough with a letter from Arthur Maxon, a self-proclaimed Master of Science from Cornell University, and follows with a fictitious interview with Tarzan himself by Master Maxon.

Then, on pages three and four, the drumbeating gets under way. First comes a reprint of a publicity release on Lex Barker, the current movie Tarzan, giving us all the accepted facts about him, including a statement that he was a football and track star at Exeter and Princeton (he did attend Exeter but by his own admission spent exactly one afternoon at Princeton at the conclusion of which he and the Dean of Admissions agreed to disagree).

This is followed by a premier report on the opening of the latest Tarzan movie in Boston—"Tarzan's Magic Fountain"—and then comes a little feature on the eleven best male physiques in Hollywood, with Mr.

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Barker duly leading the beefcake parade.

Our missing-link point should now be plain to the discerning. One of the remarkable and admirable features of Stefan publishing is its utter lack of any taint of commercialism. It has been, is and, we hope, always will be a task of devotion to science fiction and as such will always receive credit in this column.

But THE BURROUGHS BULLETIN has a definite smack of the movie fan club, which is something else again. We hope the BULLETIN is not an opening wedge for this very low type of exploitation.

—THE EDITOR.

NOCTURNE

(Concluded from page 130)

cradled her bright head on his shoulder. "What I couldn't do with my knowledge, you did with your heart. They understand. They'll let us go now."

"You made me understand first," she answered. "Oh, Percy, Percy! Forgive me for all the nasty things I've said and done to you."

* * * * *

Two days later they stood in the control room, looking down at Rick as the *Star Rover*, safely back in the Warp, plunged homeward from Jonah at four times light speed.

"Maybe you should change your mind, colleen," said Percy. "I'm just a balding star-snooper without even a past. Rick has everything a fair woman could want—a brilliant future, courage, good looks—and curly hair."

Her hand made no motion, this time, to stroke those curls.

"Poor Rick," she sighed. "Take-offs knock him out as badly as landings do. We'd better get him to his cabin."

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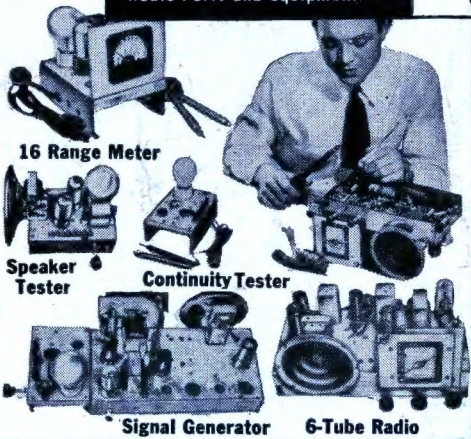


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